

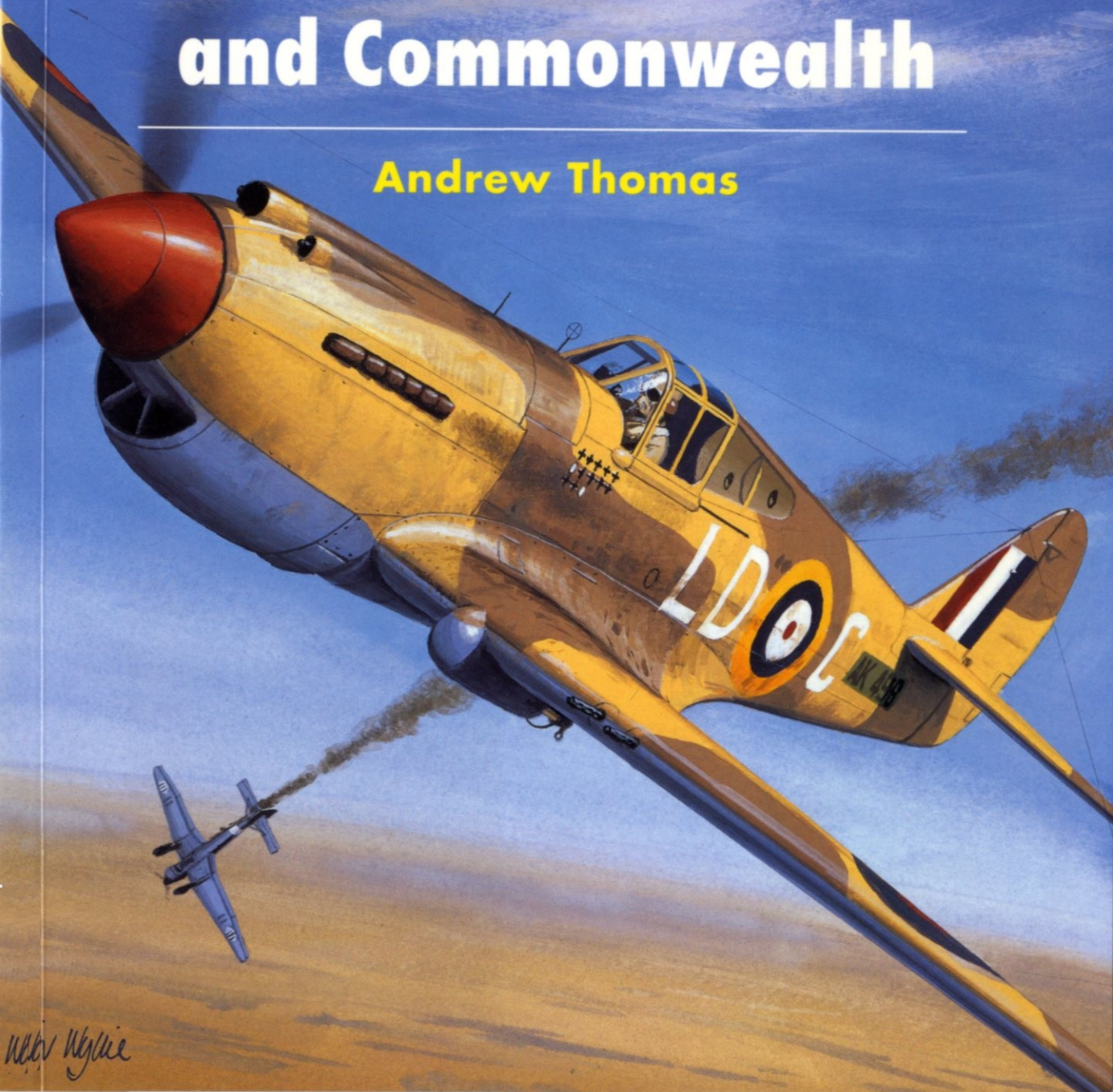


OSPREY AIRCRAFT OF THE ACES® • 38



Tomahawk and Kittyhawk Aces of the RAF and Commonwealth

Andrew Thomas



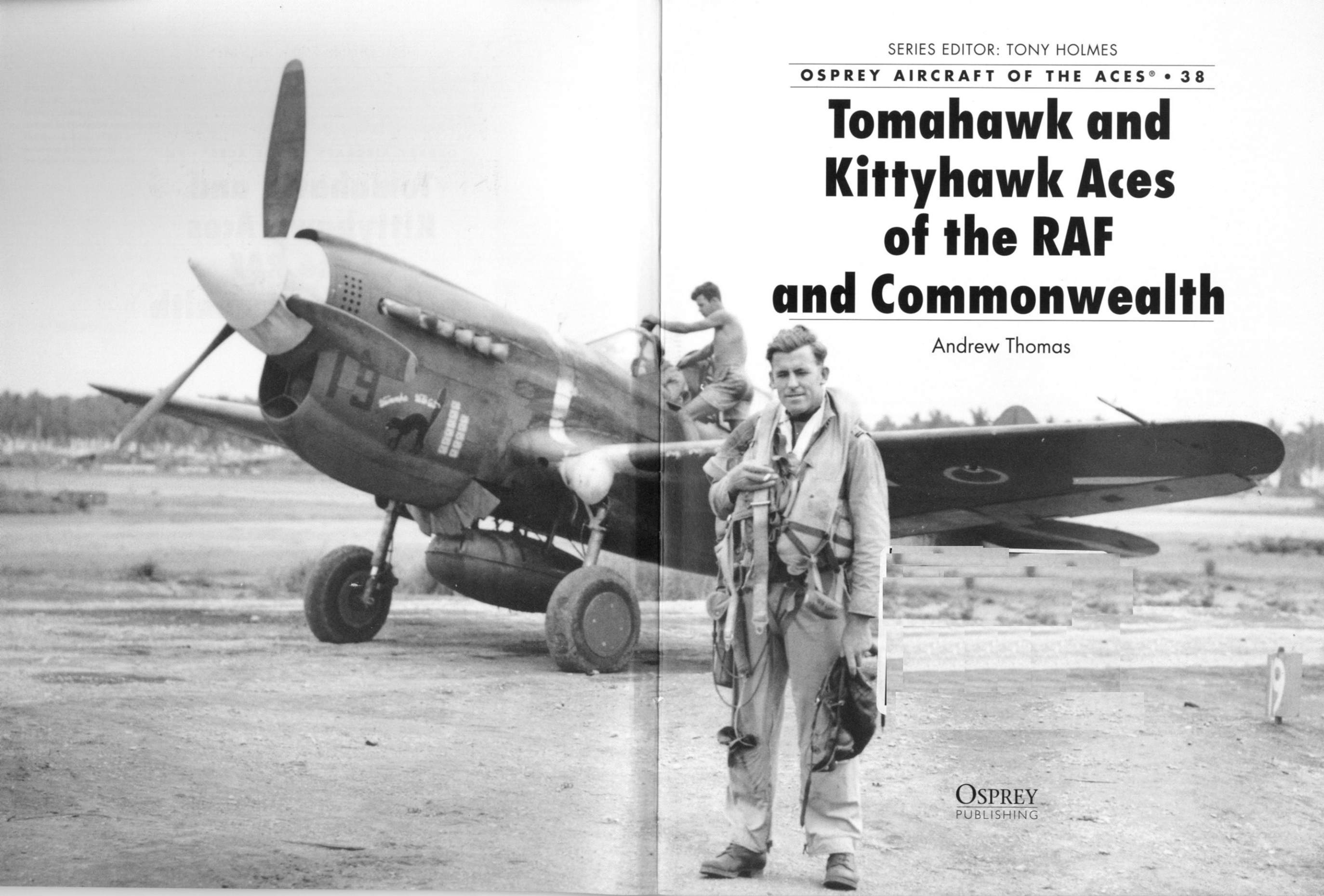
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OSPREY
PUBLISHING

Front cover

In the late morning of 5 December 1941, during the 8th Army's Operation *Crusader* offensive, Australian Flt Lt Clive Caldwell, a flight commander in No 250 'Sudan' Sqn, led ten of his Tomahawks, and ten more from No 112 Sqn as top cover, on a patrol towards El Adem, in Cyrenaica (now Libya). At 1140 hrs, some ten miles west of El Gubi, a large enemy formation of Ju 87 Stukas, escorted by Bf 109s, Fiat G.50s and Macchi C.200s, approached the same area. The Axis dive-bombers were from I./StG 1, II./StG 2 and I./StG 3, along with Italian Ju 87R 'Picchiarelli' from 239^o *Squadriglia Autonomo B a T*.

Caldwell, who was flying his regular Tomahawk IIB AK498/LD-C, received a radio message warning him of the enemy aircraft, which were approaching from the north-west at the same altitude as the RAF fighters. Caldwell put the Tomahawk formation into an immediate climb, and in less than a minute he spotted the enemy aircraft off to his right. Having ordered the No 250 Sqn fighters to line up directly astern of him, Caldwell dived on the Stukas from their rear quarter, while No 112's Tomahawks kept their escorts busy.

Caldwell picked one of the rear sections of three Ju 87s and opened fire at the leading aircraft. However, having allowed for too little deflection, he hit the second and third aircraft instead, both of which caught fire and went down. He then attacked the leading Ju 87 in the section from below and behind at very close range, and it turned over and fell away with flames pouring from the wing root. Switching to a fourth Stuka, Caldwell closed on it before opening fire, flames erupting from the stricken dive-bomber, which crashed near vehicles on the ground. As he pulled up from his fourth victory, he spotted a fifth Ju 87. Easing back on his control column, the Australian fired into the Stuka's belly. His target weaved slightly, streaming smoke, before catching fire and diving into the ground.

Other 'aces' who claimed Ju 87s during this hectic fight were Sgt Bob Whittle of No 250 Sqn, who was credited with two, while No 112 Sqn's Plt Off Neville Bowker claimed three and Plt Off Jack Bartle one, as well as an escorting G.50.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

To make this best-selling series as authoritative as possible, the Editor would be interested in hearing from any individual who may have relevant photographs, documentation or first-hand experiences relating to the world's elite pilots and units, and the aircraft they flew, in the various theatres of war. Any material used will be credited to its original source. Please write to Tony Holmes at 10 Prospect Road, Sevenoaks, Kent, TN13 3UA, Great Britain, or by e-mail at: tony.holmes@osprey-jets.freemove.co.uk

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The author wishes to record his gratitude to the following former Tomahawk, Kittyhawk and Mohawk pilots who have given their time to answer queries and present accounts of their actions for inclusion in this book – Sqn Ldr A H Boyd DFC, Sqn Ldr N F Duke DSO OBE DFC AFC, Wg Cdr J F Edwards DFC DFM, Stuart Garnett, Wg Cdr R H M Gibbes DSO DFC, Wg Cdr J A A Gibson DSO DFC, Gp Capt G J C Hogan DFC AFC, Wg Cdr R F Martin DFC, Air Cdre W Pitt-Brown CBE DFC AFC and Derek Wicks.

The author is also most grateful to the many friends and fellow enthusiasts, too numerous to mention, who have generously given their support to bring this volume to fruition.

Back at base, the young Australian ace, who already had nine and two shared kills to his name, was credited with five Ju 87s destroyed. His last two victims were the 239^o *Squadriglia 'Picchiarelli'* flown by Sottotenente Stefonia and Sergente Mangano. At the end of December Caldwell's brilliant flying and fight-

ing qualities led to him being simultaneously awarded the DFC and bar.

This specially commissioned artwork by Iain Wyllie shows Caldwell's fourth Stuka beginning to roll over and fall away towards the desert floor, its wing root on fire. The ace, meanwhile, has already started to turn to pull up under his final victim

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DESERT WAR HATCHETS

The Curtiss P-40 series of fighters was a progressive development of the company's earlier radial-engined P-36 which had been ordered in substantial numbers by the USAAC and the French *l'Armée de l'Air*. There was clearly development potential in the airframe, and this duly led to the production of a variant fitted with an Allison inline engine. France contracted for the type as the Hawk H-81, which the US designated the P-40. The British Purchasing Commission also issued an initial contract for the type, which was named Tomahawk in RAF service after the war axe used by the North American Indians.

Later fitted with more powerful engines and increased armament, the aircraft, from the P-40D series onwards, was known as the Kittyhawk. As such, it was to see widespread and distinguished service with the Commonwealth air forces in many theatres, ranging from the blazing heat of North Africa to the steamy jungles of New Guinea and the Solomons.

Initially, the Curtiss machine was used in the fighter role, but later it served to great effect as a fighter-bomber until war's end. Almost 50 pilots from the Commonwealth air forces claimed five or more victories flying it, and nearly 40 more aces made at least part of their 'score' on the type.

Trials showed that the Tomahawk would be unsuitable for service in the fighter role over Europe, and indeed the early Mark Is were woefully armed. However, it was decided that the better armed Mk IIBs should

The only ace known to have flown Tomahawks operationally in the UK was American Plt Off Hollis Hills, who served with No 414 Sqn RCAF in the army co-operation role in 1941-42. Records do not list the aircraft that the future US Navy Hellcat ace flew, but AK185/RU-V was with the unit at the same time as Hills (Author's collection)

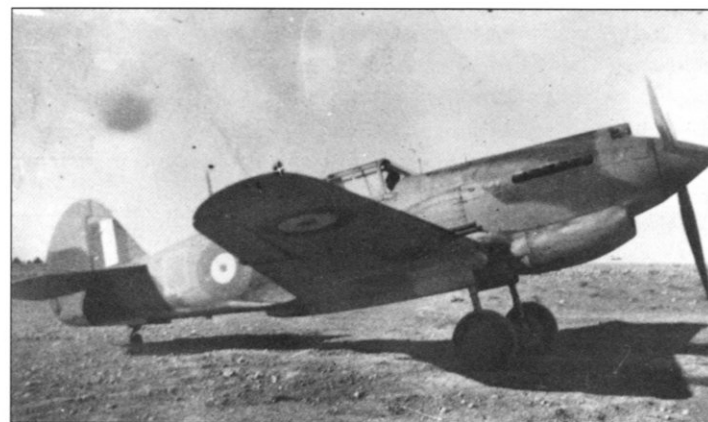


Below

One of the first Tomahawk IIBs delivered to No 250 Sqn was this particular machine coded 'Q', which was possibly AK369. Seen at Aqir in May 1941, if it is indeed AK369, then Plt Off Clive Caldwell flew it on his first operational sortie when, on 14 May, he escorted bombers to Palmyra (A J Thorne)

Bottom

Five pilots of the newly formed No 250 Sqn demonstrate how to load the Tomahawk's pair of 0.50-in nose guns. On the ground are two aces – immediately aft of the wing is the unit CO, Sqn Ldr J E Scouler, and next to him is Flt Lt Dickie Martin (R F Martin)



re-equip fighter squadrons in the Middle East, this decision following the December 1940 rejection of the Tomahawk by Fighter Command after the latter had conducted brief trials with Mk IIAs AH885, AH886, AH887 and AH889 – these had been issued to No 234 Sqn.

Of the 1041 Tomahawks ordered by the British, 112 Mk Is and 104 Mk IIs were issued to Army Co-operation Command in the UK, entering service with No 26 Sqn in February 1941. This unit was later joined by other squadrons in the army co-operation role, but the aircraft saw only very limited operational use. The only known ace to have flown the Tomahawk operationally in the UK was Plt Off Hollis Hills, an American serving with No 414 Sqn RCAF. He joined the unit on 12 October 1941, and remained with it until November of the following year, claiming the RAF's first Mustang victory over Dieppe in the process. He later transferred to the US Navy and became an ace flying the F6F Hellcat in the Pacific (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 7* and *10* for further details).

COMBAT DEBUT

No 250 Sqn began forming at Aqir, in Palestine, in April 1941 as the first Tomahawk unit in the Middle East, the unit being created around a nucleus of pilots and groundcrew provided by the East African-based Gladiator unit 'K' Flight. No 250 was commanded by Sqn Ldr John Scouler, an ace with 13.5 victories.

With British relations with the government in nearby Iraq rapidly deteriorating, the unit duly received its first nine Tomahawks on 29 April.

No 250 Sqn continued to grow, and in early May the first RAAF pilots arrived at Aqir. Included within their ranks were two future stars, Plt Off Clive Caldwell and Sgt Bob Whittle, the latter recalling that although he had never flown a Tomahawk, he had no difficulty landing it. Also on the squadron, as a flight commander, was Flt Lt Dickie Martin, another combat veteran with three and two shared victories to his credit. A colleague described him as;

'A great character who looked about 17 and used to get angry when you told him so, but he had a number of confirmed victories, although he would never give an exact number. One of Dickie's eccentricities was to carry a walking stick. Some said he even took it into his aircraft with him.'



The Tomahawk's first victories were claimed by Flg Off Hamlyn of No 250 Sqn in early June 1941. He was also the unit's first loss, being shot down on 18 June. He returned on 4 July, albeit with badly blistered feet after his ordeal in the desert (R F Martin)

Sqn Ldr Peter Jeffrey was CO of No 3 Sqn RAAF, and he later became a wing leader, scoring most of his 5.5 kills on Tomahawks. The first of these was claimed on 13 June 1941 during the Syrian campaign, when he shot down a Ju 88 west of Saida. He later worked up squadrons for service in New Guinea (B Cull)



On 12 May ten Tomahawks were detached to Amriya, in Egypt, to beef up the air defences around the port of Alexandria. Two days later, a pair of aircraft sortied from Aqir on the type's first operation in-theatre, Flg Offs Wolsey and Aldridge escorting three Blenheims to Palmyra, in Syria, where they found Luftwaffe aircraft in transit, bound for Iraq in support of the rebellion. After the Blenheims had dropped their bombs, the fighters then flew several strafing passes, leaving at least one aircraft on fire.

That same day the first Tomahawks for No 3 Sqn RAAF were delivered to Lydda, in Palestine, the ex-Gladiator unit (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 44 - Gladiator Aces of World War 2* for further details) immediately beginning preparations for the forthcoming invasion of Vichy French Syria, code named Operation *Exporter*.

No 250 Sqn flew another escort mission on the 15th, and the following day Wolsey and Caldwell were sent to Cyprus. On the 22nd No 250 concentrated once again in Egypt for the defence of Alexandria. During a patrol on 8 June Flg Off 'Jack' Hamlyn and Sgt Paxton found an Italian Cant Z.1007, the squadron's record book stating that Hamlyn 'engaged and damaged the aeroplane, which appeared to be about to make a forced landing when it was downed by shore batteries from a height of 600 ft.'

Hamlyn was nevertheless credited with the Tomahawk's first air combat victory, and indeed the first for a Curtiss Hawk series ace. Two days later he claimed a second victory when, during another patrol, he came across a reconnaissance Ju 88 of 2(F)/123, which he shot down. On 11 June No 250 Sqn moved to Sidi Haneish, again in Egypt, in preparation for the forthcoming offensive.

SYRIAN SUCCESS

No 3 Sqn was an experienced unit from the early desert fighting of 1940, and had already established a reputation for aggression. Early on 8 June the CO, Sqn Ldr Peter Jeffrey (in AK476), led a section of five, including Plt Off Bobby Gibbes on his first operation, to strafe the French base at Rayak. There, they destroyed a Dewoitine D.520 and damaged others.

No 3 continued flying ground attack missions for several days, but on the afternoon of the 13th found action when Jeffrey led eight aircraft to cover a Royal Navy cruiser force steaming off the Syrian coast. They arrived overhead just as a formation of Ju 88s from II./LG 1 began attacking the vessels, and in a swift attack the Australians claimed three destroyed and two damaged.

One of the bombers fell to Jeffrey, who reported that 'its starboard engine burst into flames and the enemy made off towards Beyrouth (Beirut - author). I attacked again and apparently put the other engine out of action, as enemy glided down and into the sea'. The Ju 88 broke up upon hitting the water, giving Jeffrey his third victory (one of them shared), and opening No 3 Sqn's 'account' with the Curtiss fighter in dramatic fashion. 'Rookie' Bobby Gibbes was credited with a probable - the first claim of his distinguished career in North Africa.

Two days later Jeffrey led a formation to attack Vichy armour in the Sheikh Meskine area, and during the attacks the pilots spotted five Martin 167 bombers of GB I/39. One fell to the CO and a second to Flg Off Peter Turnbull (in AK427), who 'chased one eastwards, making three stern attacks, setting the starboard engine on fire - so I followed until it

crashed and burnt'. His victim was probably aircraft No 118, flown by Sgt Chef Tanchoux, whose crew were all killed. Turnbull's first Tomahawk victory was his fifth overall, making him the first pilot to 'make ace' flying the Curtiss fighter.

As the campaign progressed, so No 3 Sqn continued very effective strafing operations. The unit encountered Vichy fighters for the first time on 23 June, shooting down two D.520s, while on the 25th, during a patrol to the Palmyra area, three LeO 451s (identified as 'Potez 63s') were all shot down. Flg Offs John Jackson (in AK366) and John Saunders (in AK393) each claimed one to become No 3's latest aces, while the third was shot down by Sgt 'Tiny' Cameron - the first of his 6.5 victories.

The squadron was even more successful three days later when nine Tomahawks, led by Flt Lt Alan Rawlinson, laid on an escort for a Blenheim raid. Nearing Palmyra, they saw six *Aeronavale* Martin 167s from Flotille 4F, and in less than three minutes all were destroyed. Two fell to Peter Turnbull and one to Sgt Rex Wilson (the first of his five victories). Rawlinson downed the remaining three - 6B-3, 6B-4 and 7B-5 - to be elevated to ace status. It was an outstanding success for the unit, which continued to punish the enemy with its effective strafing missions.

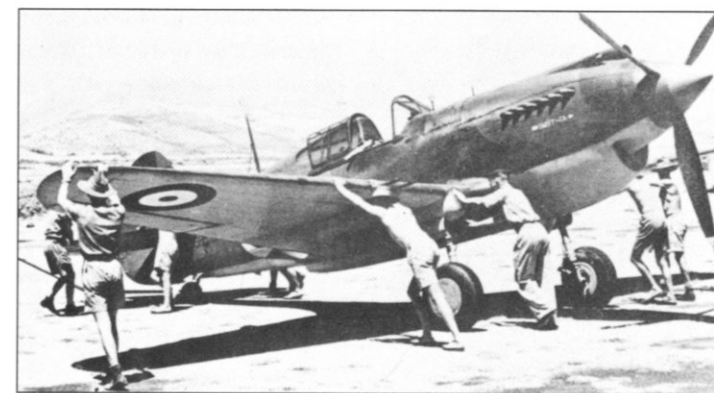
The Vichy fighters still tried to stop the RAF bombing attacks, and on 10 July five Dewoitines passed unseen through No 3's escorting Tomahawks to bring down three Blenheims in quick succession, as well as damage many others. The Australians reacted swiftly, and were credited with destroying all five Dewoitines, two of which were credited to Turnbull and one to Jackson, although only two were actually downed.

Operations continued the following day, with No 3 Sqn flying several missions. During one to Aleppo, Lt Lete of GC II/3, flying D.520 No 332, bounced the Tomahawks and shot down the 'weaver' before being downed himself by John Jackson and Bobby Gibbes. The latter was credited with his first kill after the pilots tossed a coin for it!

Armistice terms were offered to the French that same day, and hostilities ceased at midnight on 11 June. For No 3 Sqn it had been a successful introduction to its new aircraft, although by then the Tomahawk was facing tougher tests in the Western Desert, to where the unit moved in early September.

ABORTIVE OFFENSIVE

In Egypt, No 250 Sqn's Tomahawks had been available to support XIII Corps' Operation *Battleaxe* offensive, which commenced on 14 June. The RAF was charged with providing an 'umbrella' of aerial cover for the advancing troops, and in three days the unit's Tomahawks flew a series of standing patrols over the battlefield, but saw little of the Luftwaffe. However, at 1500 hrs on 16 June eight aircraft from No 250 Sqn encountered five Bf 109s at 22,000 ft over Bardia. Sqn Ldr Scoular, (in



Tomahawk AM386 of No 3 Sqn RAAF was named *SWEET FA* and flown by aces Alan Rawlinson and Peter Turnbull. Retaining its European camouflage, the aircraft was involved in a freak accident on 22 August 1941 when its starboard tailplane detached, and it was only by great skill that Rawlinson managed to land the fighter safely (A C Rawlinson)

AK416) and Flt Lt Martin (in AK419) each damaged one. Interestingly, German combat reports identified the Tomahawks as 'Brewsters'. When interviewed for this book about this historic first encounter with the Luftwaffe's fighters, 'Dickie' Martin said;

'The sortie led by John Scoular in June 1941 was over Bardia. I was sitting, unknown, right up the arse of one of the Bf 109s, and I can still clearly remember my mortification upon discovering that only my four wing-mounted 0.303-in Brownings were firing when I engaged the German fighter – I had forgotten to cock the pair of 0.50-in fuselage guns prior to opening fire! Fortunately, the quartet of working weapons scared him into a dive, which I couldn't follow – but he was streaming glycol!

'Up to a few days before this episode, we had been cocking the "point fives" while awaiting start up. However, twice the guns fired when the inertia starter switch was engaged, drilling a hole in the prop! Most of us in No 250 Sqn had come from Hurricanes with eight Brownings, and we thought the "point fives" an improvement on combat effectiveness.'

Martin was credited with a 'damaged', and he subsequently made his final combat claims on 30 June when he destroyed a G.50 and a C.200 off Tobruk. His CO made his final claims of two destroyed on 25 June (a G.50) and 23 August (a Ju 88), both whilst flying a Tomahawk IIB.

By 18 June the battle had swung very much in the enemy's favour, so RAF fighters were now given the job of strafing the advancing Axis forces – a task in which they proved effective, but at a price. Early in the morning eight of No 250's aircraft strafed the Capuzzo-El Adem road, but Flg Off Hamlyn's machine was hit by flak and he force-landed 40 miles east of Tobruk. He eventually returned on 4 July, having achieved the dubious distinction of being the RAF's first Tomahawk loss in the desert war.

As his squadronmates headed home, they were bounced near Sollum by four Bf 109s, which downed three more Tomahawks. It was an inauspicious beginning in the first serious combat against the Luftwaffe.

The failure of the latest Allied offensive led to a period of consolidation, with both sides building up their supplies for future action. Although occasional fighter sweeps were flown, the main air action was in support of supply ships, particularly those steaming into the vital port town of Tobruk.

On 26 June, during an attack on Gazala, No 250's Tomahawk pilots at last enjoyed their first successful engagement when Clive Caldwell (in AK419) and Sgt Coward each shot down a Bf 109E. This was the first victory for Caldwell, a skilled and determined pilot whose aggressiveness quickly earned him the nickname 'Killer' which he detested! Bobby Gibbes recalled that 'he was given the name "Killer", which was not of his choosing or liking, due to his habit of shooting up any enemy vehicle which he saw below when returning from a sortie. Invariably, he landed back at his base with almost no ammunition left'.

Caldwell was a perfectionist, and he was puzzled by the fact that he had trouble scoring hits on enemy aircraft. While returning to base one day, he saw his aircraft casting shadows on the desert below. He fired a burst from his guns, noting how the shot fell relative to his shadow, and he immediately realised that this allowed him to work out the required deflection for hitting moving targets. He practised assessing deflection, and within weeks he had claimed four more kills. This method of

Right
No 112 Sqn's fearsome sharkmouth marking appeared soon after the unit swapped its Hurricane Is for Tomahawk Is in June 1941. Reputedly the idea of future ace Flt Lt Jerry Westenra, the marking was applied before the unit letters or even the desert camouflage, as proven by this photo of a force-landed fighter still in its dark earth and dark green colours (Author's collection)

'shadow-shooting' later became the standard for gunnery practice in the Middle East.

It was an important contribution by the Australian, whose star continued to rise at the end of June while he was escorting a Tobruk-bound convoy which came under attack from 20 Stukas, with fighter escorts. Caldwell (in AK346) downed two Ju 87s from II./StG 2. He also shared in the destruction of a Bf 110 from III./ZG 26 with future ace Sgt Bob Whittle (his first success). Describing the latter kill, Caldwell noted;

'In company with Sgt Whittle, I attacked an Me 110 at about 15,000 ft. Sgt Whittle attacked first from astern and disengaged. I attacked the rear quarter and astern, and before disengaging observed smoke pouring from the starboard engine. Whittle again attacked and saw the enemy aircraft continuing to dive apparently out of control. The Me 110 went down approximately six miles north-west of the ships. Time 1735 hrs.'

FURTHER SQUADRONS

By then No 112 Sqn had swapped most of its Hurricane Is for Tomahawks, and also been joined by several battle-seasoned pilots who had been successful flying Gladiators in Greece, among them aces Flt Lt Homer Cochrane and Flg Off Jack Groves. No 2 Sqn SAAF also began re-equipping, having moved up from East Africa (where it had flown Hurricanes, Gladiators and Furies), and it too boasted a number of combat-experienced pilots.

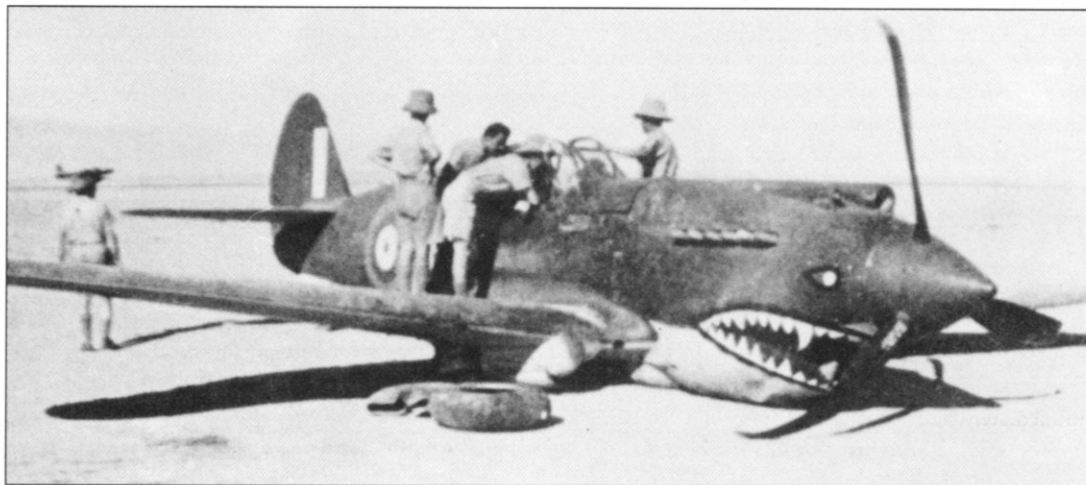
On 7 July No 250 Sqn took part in an uneventful sweep. Having become separated from his squadronmates, Clive Caldwell came across two Italian G.50s and promptly shot one of them down. He thus became the first pilot to claim five victories on the Tomahawk.

No 2 Sqn SAAF began operations later that month, seeing its first combat on the 29th when eight of its Tomahawks intercepted I./StG 1's Ju 87s, and their escort, east of Bardia. Although it lost two Tomahawks, the South Africans claimed four of the dive-bombers. One of these fell to Capt Doug Loftus for his third victory. He became CO soon afterwards.

Up until then the Tomahawks had been painted in 'European' colours of dark green and dark earth uppersurfaces and sky undersurfaces, but on 2 August No 250 Sqn collected two aircraft in a 'desert' scheme consisting



With nine and one shared victories, Bob Whittle was one of the leading exponents of the Tomahawk in North Africa. He served with No 250 Sqn in the desert, where he won the DFM. Later returning to Australia, Whittle joined No 86 Sqn, equipped with Kittyhawks, in New Guinea, and scored a further one and two shared kills (The late R J C Whittle)





of mid stone and dark earth uppersurfaces and azure blue undersurfaces, and this duly became the standard for fighters in the desert theatre.

Another distinctive feature also began appearing on Tomahawks at about this time when the famous sharkmouth marking was applied to No 112 Sqn's A Flight aircraft. The large pointed spinner and deep intake under the nose lent itself to the marking, which was inspired, it is believed, by those worn on the Bf 110s of ZG 76, which the squadron had encountered over Greece. It is thought that future ace Plt Off Jerry West-entra designed the marking subsequently adopted by the unit.

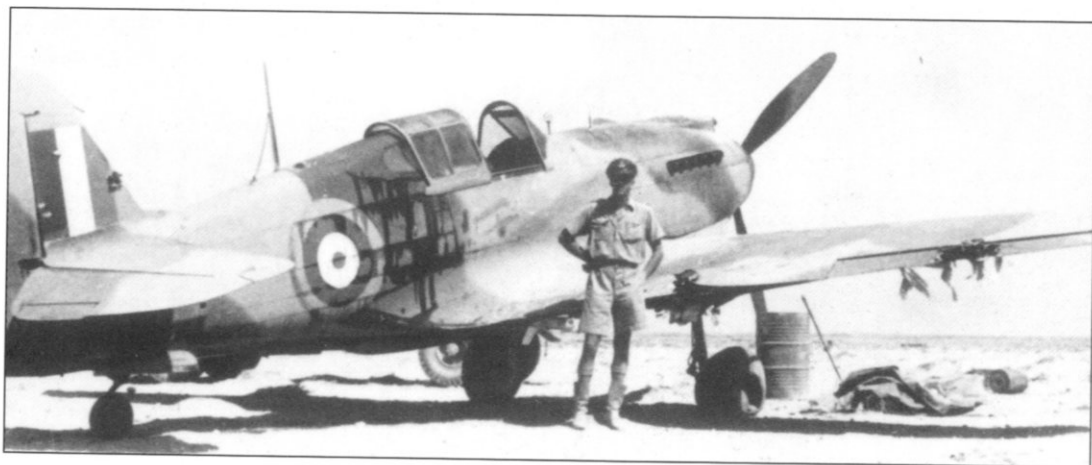
Escorting convoys into Tobruk was still the main task being performed by Tomahawk pilots in the summer of 1941, and it was on one such mission on 26 August that Sgt Maurice Hards enjoyed his first success when he downed a Bf 109, although he had to crash-land AK374/LD-H shortly afterwards.

During the evening of 29 August No 250 Sqn was again on convoy duty when its Tomahawks were intercepted by Bf 109s from I./JG 27. The 'weaver' was Clive Caldwell in AK493, and he was attacked by Leutnant Werner Schroer, an *experte* (who finished the war with 114 kills, 61 of which were scored in the North Africa) flying Bf 109E 'Black 8'. The Australian had a tough time, as he later recalled;

'I was attacked by two Me 109s, one coming from astern and the other from the port side. Bullets from astern damaged my tail, tail trimming

Sgt Maurice Hards was flying Tomahawk IIB AK374/LD-H on 26 August 1941 when he shot down a Bf 109 north of Sidi Barrani. He was then attacked by a second fighter flown by *experte* Feldwebel Günther Steinhausen, and had to make a forced landing as seen here. Later commissioned, he became the CO of No 111 Sqn, flying Spitfires, in December 1943 (Author's collection)

Plt Off Clive Caldwell stands by Tomahawk AK493 at Sidi Haneish on 29 August 1941 after his fighter was badly shot up by Leutnant Werner Schroer. Having survived the attack, the Australian destroyed a Bf 109 on his way home! (The late R J C Whittle)



In September 1941 Hurricane-equipped No 73 Sqn received three Tomahawk IIBs, possibly as a prelude to re-equipping. AK490, seen here, was delivered to Amriya, but its stay with the unit lasted only a couple of months. Note the fighter's distinctive two-tone blue colours, modelled on No 73 Sqn's pre-war marking, and applied against regulations. This decoration was apparently introduced as a ready means of identifying squadron aircraft in a fight. The idea must have stuck, for No 73's aircraft subsequently wore the flash for most of the war! AK490 is being flown by unit CO, and ace, Sqn Ldr Peter Wykeham-Barnes, who reputedly authorised the application of the marking (D Minterne)



gear, fuselage and starboard mainplane, while the aileron on that side was destroyed and a sizeable hole made in the trailing edge.

'Fire from the port side damaged the fuselage and entered my left shoulder and hip, small pieces of glass embedding in my face. I blacked out when pulling out of the ensuing dive, recovering to find flames in the cockpit. I started to climb out to abandon the aircraft when the fire died out, so I decided to remain and attempt a landing.'

Schroer left, claiming a victory, but as Caldwell continued;

'I saw a number of aeroplanes manoeuvring, which suggested an engagement. I made a gradual turn and climbed back towards said aircraft, finally carrying out an attack on what I believed was an Me 109.'

His indomitable spirit and bravery is evident in this account – the Bf 109 he attacked was credited as his seventh confirmed kill, two of which were shared.

The Tomahawk units continued to see sporadic action during early September. On the 14th No 112 Sqn entered the fray after it had moved forward to Sidi Haneish, and soon afterwards the lull in the desert fighting was broken by Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel's thrust towards Sidi Barrani. No 112's operations diary provides an account;

'An R/T message was received that there was a bandit over Mersa Matruh at 19,000 ft. The formation climbed to 16,000 ft and spotted an SM.79 below. Plt Off Bowker attacked, firing his wing guns only as his 0.50-in guns had jammed. He reset the 0.50s and returned to the attack, and at 150 yards he saw petrol streaming from his foe. He pumped shots into the starboard engine and fuselage and the SM.79 blew up.'

No 112's first Tomahawk victory had been spectacular. For Neville Bowker, who was flying AN218, it meant a second victory, and by the end of the year he had taken his total to around 10.5 kills.

Well rested after the Syrian campaign, No 3 Sqn RAAF also joined in the desert air fighting for the first time in early September, but during an evening strafing attack it lost two fighters to predatory Bf 109s. A brief lull in the fighting allowed No 2 Sqn SAAF to be rested, and several of No 3 Sqn's most experienced personnel to return to the unit, including Flt Lt 'Woof' Arthur, who had claimed three kills in Gladiators and Hurricanes.

No 3's first blood in the desert came on 24 September when a returning lunchtime offensive patrol came across a Ju 88. Two Tomahawks dived on it, one flown by five-victory ace Flt Lt John Saunders, who wrote 'I dived down and attacked the Ju 88 after making a circuit above. I made a couple

of attacks from astern then lost my own and enemy aircraft in cloud. Sighted the enemy again in bad shape and attempted to head it back with head-on attacks. After the fight the Ju 88's port engine was in flames, and the bomber appeared to be out of control.'

The satisfaction of his sixth (and final) victory was short lived, for Saunders was then set upon by half a dozen Bf 109s and forced down, being slightly wounded. The



German fighters then strafed his aircraft and set it on fire. Saunders was picked up, but on 22 November he was killed in action, being one of three pilots from No 3 Sqn who fell to the guns of I/JG 27's Bf 109s.

The Bf 109s continued their scoring on 25 September, when Plt Off 'Jerry' Westenra of No 112 Sqn, who had several claims in Gladiators, was bounced and forced to bail out. He later got his revenge, becoming an ace on 22 December and ending the war with eight and three shared kills.

Sweeps and escorts continued, and No 2 Sqn SAAF returned to the fray in October when, on the 3rd, Lt Dennis Lacey claimed his first victory. Scoring a freakish kill, he was just about to land at Sidi Barrani when some Bf 109s appeared ahead of him. Lacey fired a short burst at one of them and to his surprise it crashed. He had later discovered that he had just brought down the first of the deadly new Bf 109Fs to fall in the desert.

Soon afterwards two of No 3's aces, Alan Rawlinson and Peter Turnbull, received the DFC, as did Maj Doug Loftus in early November. He was the first pilot in No 2 Sqn SAAF to be so honoured, and the unit's diary recorded that he 'most certainly deserves it. His courage and devotion to duty is a byword in the squadron'.

Although there was a relative stalemate on the ground, action in the air continued as British and Commonwealth forces prepared for their next offensive. In mid October the fighters were grouped into wings, two of which included Tomahawk squadrons. No 258 Wing parented Nos 112, 250, 2 SAAF and 3 RAAF Sqns based near the frontline, while No 262 Wing's role was rear defence. As squadrons rotated to rest and re-equip they were allocated to the control of the appropriate Wing HQ. Sweeps continued, and during one on the 30th, when No 250's Tomahawks flew in company with those of No 2 SAAF and 112, Sgt Bob Whittle downed a Bf 109F near Sollum while flying his appropriately named *Nux Vomica* (Deadly Poison), AM392/LD-W. However, there were several losses too.

OPERATION CRUSADER

At the beginning of November No 4 Sqn SAAF arrived in North Africa, and early in the morning of the 12th launched 12 DX-coded Tomahawks, led by Capt Kreil, on the unit's first patrol, flying top cover to No 2 Sqn SAAF. No 4 was blooded the following day during a scramble against some Bf 109Es, and Lt Adler was shot down and killed.

***NUX VOMICA* (Deadly Poison) was the name given by Sgt Bob Whittle to AM392/LD-W of No 250 Sqn, who flew the fighter for the first time on 4 August 1941. It was his for the next three months, although he made only one claim with it – a Bf 109F, which he shot down near Sollum on 30 October (The late R J C Whittle)**

In a further attempt to relieve Tobruk, a new offensive, Operation *Crusader*, was planned. In preparation for it there were more attacks on enemy positions and logistics centres, with the Tomahawks flying numerous bomber escort missions. Action for them was about to increase dramatically, and as a consequence so did the number of Tomahawk aces.

Most squadrons received reinforcements, one of whom was Plt Off Neville Duke, who joined No 112 Sqn with two victories on Spitfires in the UK. However, his arrival was inauspicious, as the following day on his first familiarisation trip in a Tomahawk, he misjudged his approach and crashed AM390. He soon got to grips with the type, although he recorded in his diary that he did not like it as much as the Spitfire. No 112 Sqn, as part of No 262 Wing with Nos 250 and 4 SAAF Sqns, moved to Sidi Barrani on the 14th, while No 258 Wing controlled Nos 2 SAAF and 3 RAAF Sqns.

Crusader, the biggest offensive of the desert war so far, began on 18 November, and heavy rain the previous night rendered the main enemy fighter bases around Gazala inoperable. With air support, the newly redesignated 8th Army (comprising XIII and XXX Corps) pushed the Axis forces back towards the west, but a counterstroke by Rommel on the 24th brought a temporary shift to the east.

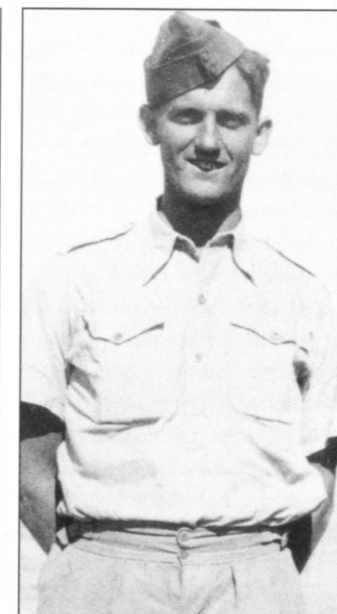
Hampered by the state of their airfields, the Luftwaffe initially struggled to oppose the Allied offensive. However, on the 20th – a day of big tank battles on the ground – there was heavy air fighting. Early on, Peter Jeffrey, now a wing commander, led No 3 RAAF and No 112 Sqns on a sweep, and past El Adem they engaged Bf 110s. Several were destroyed, including one by Sgt Ron Simes of No 3 Sqn (in AM507), this being his first kill. Sgt 'Blue' Leu of No 112 also shared one for his first success.

Later, when No 250 was active over the Gambut area covering Royal Navy Hurricanes, they encountered a dozen Ju 87s from I./StG 1. Bob Whittle hit four, claiming one destroyed, but two more were later confirmed by a naval pilot. These three victories made the young NCO the squadron's latest ace. Another sergeant pilot to enjoy success with the unit on this day was 'Slinger' Nitschke who, on his first mission, was credited with two Ju 87s destroyed and an escorting Bf 109 damaged. His fighter was hit during the engagement, however, and he was forced to crash-land.

Nitschke was to claim three more victims during the fighting of early December, but like so many others, his was to enjoy only a brief career, for he was shot down and killed by JG 27's omnipotent Bf 109s on the 20th.

Ferocious air fighting continued, and near El Adem patrolling Tomahawks of No 112 Sqn came across Italian CR.42s at low level. Pouncing on the nimble biplanes, 'Blue' Leu shot one down while Neville Duke opened his desert 'account' when, with two others, he attacked a second Fiat which somersaulted upon hitting the ground.

That afternoon No 4 Sqn SAAF, with No 2 as cover, mounted a ground strafing mission. They were opposed by several C.200s, one of which was quickly downed, while Lt Eric 'Danny' Saville manoeuvred



Sgt 'Slinger' Nitschke, an Australian who served with No 250 Sqn, made all of his five claims in late 1941. He was shot down and killed on 20 December in combat with Bf 109s from JG 27 near Barce (The late R J C Whittle)

During the afternoon of 21 November 1941 Tomahawks of No 2 Sqn SAAF encountered three *Regia Aeronautica* C.200s over Sidi Rezegh. Lt 'Danny' Saville, flying this aircraft (AN311/TA-C) manoeuvred so closely to one of them that they collided, and he was duly credited with probably destroying it! (J E Pelly Fry)



so closely to another that he struck it violently with his starboard wingtip, and only by some very skilful flying did he manage to land at El Adem. The Macchi was credited to him as a probable, although it may in fact have been destroyed – his first step to 'acedom', albeit by somewhat unconventional means!

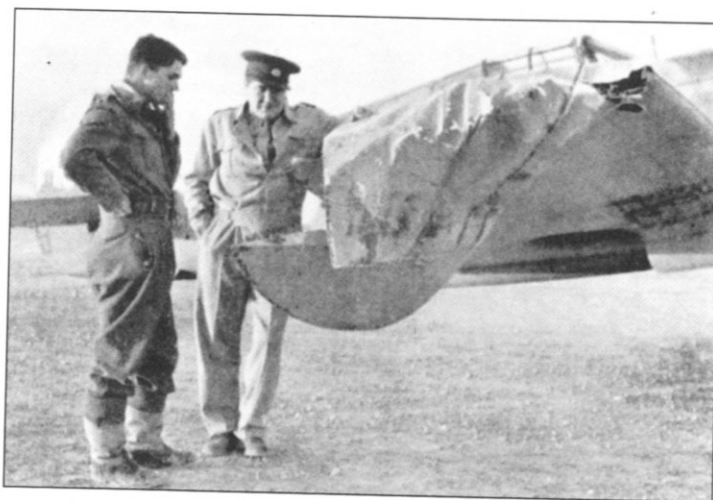
The following day saw fierce air fighting in which each side attempted to wrest superiority over the battlefield. No 3 Sqn RAAF flew an early patrol, and during a bomber escort lost three pilots, including six-victory ace John Saunders. No 112 Sqn also flew a patrol and lost a pilot as well.

Later in the afternoon both squadrons went off on another sweep, and south-east of El Adem they encountered more than 20 Bf 109s of I. and II./JG 27. A lengthy dogfight ensued, and Peter Jeffrey and Sgt Simes were both forced down but later picked up. No 3 Sqn lost four more pilots, however, while No 112 had future ace Sgt Henry Burney shot down, although he later returned on foot with Wg Cdr Fred Rosier, who had landed his Hurricane to pick him up but had burst a tyre on landing.

On the credit side, No 3's CO, Sqn Ldr Alan Rawlinson, claimed a Bf 109 destroyed, a second probably destroyed and three others damaged, while 'Woof' Arthur also damaged three. No 112 Sqn's Plt Off Jack Bartle (in AK538) shot down the first of his victims during this engagement, while Neville Duke also enjoyed another success, as he later recalled;

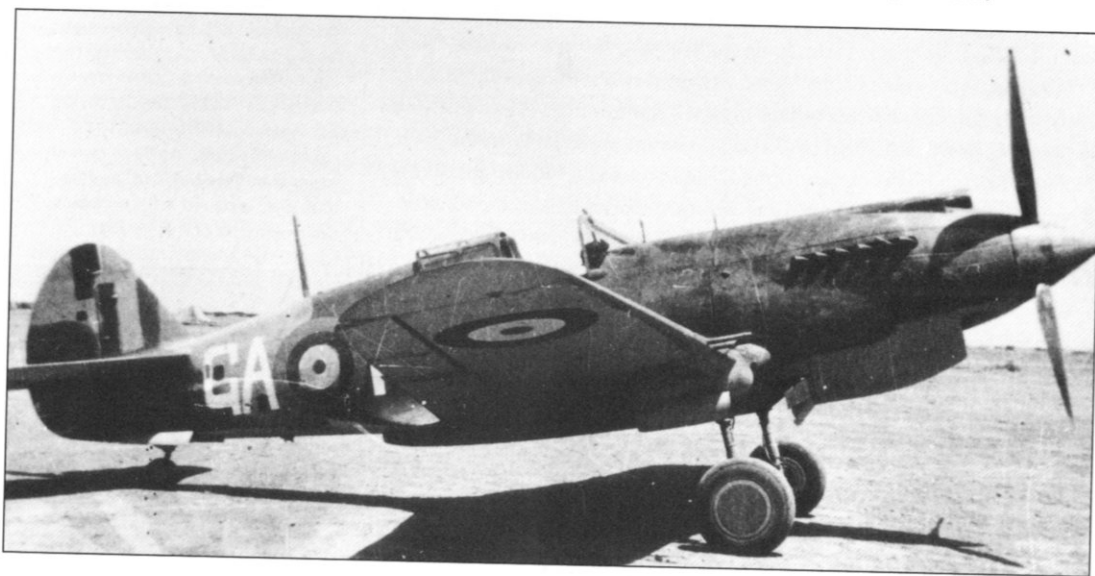
'I got on the tail of an Me 109 and followed him up, firing a burst from its stern quarter and its hood and pieces of fuselage disintegrated. The machine went into a vertical dive and the pilot bailed out.'

His victim was probably Obergefreiter Waskott.



After brushing (literally!) with the *Regia Aeronautica*, Lt 'Danny' Saville (left) relates the story to famous American war correspondent Quentin Reynolds at El Adem. The damage to the Tomahawk's wing is remarkable (Author's collection)

Tomahawk IIB AN413/GA-K of No 112 Sqn boasts desert camouflage, but still awaits the addition of the unit's fearsome sharkmouth marking. Note how roughly the GA squadron codes have been applied aft of the roundel. This particular fighter was flown by several aces, including Plt Offs Jack Bartle and Neville Duke (P Ricketts)



The 22nd was, however, a black day for No 3 Sqn, with nine pilots missing from operations, five being killed. There was further combat on 23 November too, with the Desert Air Force flying numerous bombing and strafing missions to counter the thrust by the *Afrika Korps* towards Tobruk and Sidi Rezegh. Opposed by heavy ground fire, units again endured considerable losses. The middle of the day saw No 250 Sqn at its most active, with Sgt Hards downing two Bf 109s and, among other claims, Caldwell and Whittle each destroying a Messerschmitt fighter.

That evening eight Tomahawks of No 4 Sqn SAAF took part in a wing sweep over an armoured division, leaving Landing Ground (LG) 122 at 1600 hrs. They encountered Bf 109s, as Lt Douglas Golding recalled;

'I was flying Red 2 down sun when the call "Duck!" came over the R/T. I immediately followed my No 1 round in a sharp left-hand turn, and looking back, I saw an aircraft coming out of the sun dead astern diving steeply onto my tail. I put the stick left and forward with left rudder, which seemed to nonplus the attacking pilot. He banked steeply, trying to get inside me, whilst at the same time still diving so as to go beneath me. The next thing I know he slipped sideways beneath me.'

'I felt a terrific bump as his mainplane cut through my tailplane and into my port wing. I struggled with the controls and managed to keep in the left-hand turn. Straightening out, I looked to starboard and saw the aircraft spinning towards the ground with bits of material peeling off. I then headed for home.'

In an incident reminiscent of 'Danny' Saville's two days earlier, Golding's Tomahawk was found to have had two feet cut off the port tailplane and a deep gash inflicted on the trailing edge of the port wing, which jammed the aileron. In the same engagement Capt Andrew Bosman also attacked the Bf 109s, and he recalled that 'two pulled up directly above me and my CO. We immediately gave chase and one, seeing the CO, turned left into me and did a steep climbing turn to the right. I was about 300 ft below him, inside his turn, and gave him one burst, which seemed to slow him up, and then gave him another burst using the reflector sight. The moment I got directly behind him I fired a final burst, and his aircraft seemed to disintegrate, the engine going in one direction and the rest in bits all over the sky'. Bosman had used just 160 rounds of 0.303 and 56 rounds of 0.50-in ammunition to claim his first victory.

However, ground attacks that day took their toll, and the other side of the coin was summed up by Lt Douglas Rogan of No 2 Sqn SAAF;

'I was strafing a column of tanks with No 2 Sqn, when an enemy shell ripped through my Tomahawk's cockpit, almost severing my right leg just below the knee and lacerating my right arm and left thigh. While heading back towards friendly territory, blood was spurting profusely from the leg wound, and in sheer desperation I thrust the parachute strap and buckle into the joint linking leg and body, a measure helping to stem the flow of blood. Without timely medical attention the chance of survival would be minimal, so there was no alternative than to make for No 2 Sqn's base at Maddalena.'

'I began to reel from loss of blood when I remembered my water bottle, and after pouring water over my head, I was sufficiently refreshed to remain conscious until a safe landing was made. There was no question of saving my leg, which was duly amputated'. After recovery from his



One of the tactical innovations of the Desert Air Force was the employment of fighter wings under a wing leader. Amongst the first of this elite band was South African Lt Col Laurie Wilmot, who increased his score flying Tomahawks at the head of No 258 Wing. He also led No 262 Wing. He made ace in 1943 whilst flying Spitfires over Sicily (via C F Shores)

This group of pilots from No 112 Sqn, seen posing at LG 122 on 30 November 1941, include some of the most distinguished men from the desert war. The six aces in the group are, standing left to right, Sgt 'Blue' Leu, Plt Off Neville Duke, Sgt Henry Burney (eighth from left) and Flg Off Jerry Westenra (extreme right). Kneeling are Plt Off Neville Bowker (second from left) and Plt Off Jack Bartle (third left) (N F Duke)



dreadful injuries, Rogan returned to operations, flying Spitfires with No 1 Sqn SAAF, claiming three enemy aircraft destroyed and two probables, and later being awarded the DSO.

Ground attacks on the advancing enemy remained a priority, despite the danger posed by accurate flak, and both Nos 112 and No 3 RAAF Sqns suffered losses on the 25th, but a sweep later in the day led to further claims. Leading No 258 Wing was No 2 SAAF's CO, Lt Col Lawrie Wilmot, and he duly made his only Tomahawk claim, as was graphically described in the squadron's record book;

'He gave a demonstration of how an Me 110 should be shot down. His first burst made the engines smoulder and the second sent it into the ground in flames. On hitting the ground, it set two vehicles on fire and crashed into a third!'

This was Wilmot's fourth claim, but his fifth did not come until the invasion of Sicily in August 1943!

It was also a good day for No 3 Sqn RAAF. Having suffered such grievous losses on the 22nd, it bounced back during the afternoon with no fewer than 17 claims, including nine destroyed, many by future aces. Wg Cdr Peter Jeffrey (flying AN337) destroyed a Bf 110 for his fifth kill, with another *Zerstörer* and two Fi 156 reconnaissance aircraft being brought down by Sgt Rex Wilson. He had spotted the Fieseler whilst patrolling over Tobruk, and 'having made sure that the aircraft belonged to the enemy, I carried out an attack on both, closing in and firing good bursts with my wing guns and one cannon. Both machines, which I believe to be Storchs, crash-landed and the crews ran like hell'.

Bobby Gibbes also enjoyed his most successful day on the 25th, with two G.50s destroyed and three Fiat fighters, and a Bf 109, damaged.

The ebb and flow on the ground continued over the next few days, and by the 30th the enemy had retaken Sidi Rezegh, leaving Tobruk isolated once more. An early sweep over the area by Nos 3 and 112 Sqns on this day saw the Allied pilots engage a number of Axis fighters, and among those who claimed kills on this mission was Bobby Gibbes (in AN499). He downed a G.50 to 'make ace', while Rawlinson's C.200 gave the Australian his eighth, and last, victory. No 112's pilots also claimed, among them Neville Duke, although he was himself brought down, and he was lucky to

be picked up by a Lysander.

Of this combat, in which he claimed a G.50 destroyed and a Bf 109 probable, he recalled in his diary, 'Got into the middle of things and onto a G.50, chasing him down to ground level, where he crash-landed after pumping tons of lead into him'.

However, as related in his combat report, he was 'then attacked from astern by 2-3 Me 109Fs and a G.50. Turned into a Me 109F and gave a short burst, and observed glycol stream as he passed overhead. Pursued by Me 109F (flown by

Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz, a 30-victory *experte* – author) and finally hit in the port wing and rear petrol tank. My machine went onto its back at about 500 ft and hit the ground as it pulled out.'

Just minutes earlier Schulz had downed Sgt 'Tiny' Cameron of No 3 Sqn, then a three-victory pilot and an eventual ace. Seeing his plight, Peter Jeffrey landed, picked him up and returned safely – a daring feat for which he received a DSO. Plt Off Bowker of No 112 Sqn was also forced down, although not before he had destroyed a G.50 for his fifth victory. The outstanding action of the day, however, was that of No 3's Flt Lt 'Woof' Arthur, who downed two Ju 87s, a G.50 and an C.200 to become an ace, although he too force-landed on his way home and had to 'hoof it'.

STUKA PARTIES

The first day of December saw two Tomahawks of No 3 Sqn scrambled, and Rex Wilson became the latest pilot to attain ace status when he brought down a Ju 88 of 2(F)./123. Sadly, this was to be his final claim, for his spectacular run of success was ended eight days later when he fell victim to I./JG 27's Bf 109s. Just 22 when he was killed, the young South Australian was posthumously awarded a DFM the following month.

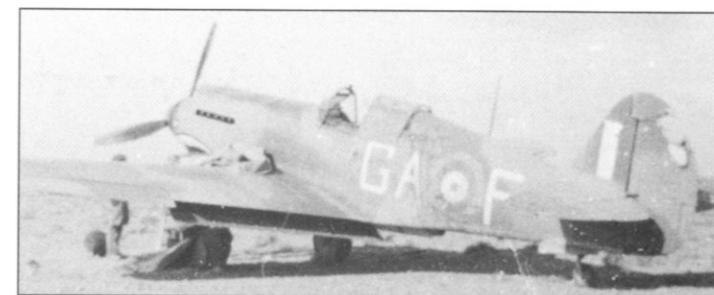
On the 4th another youngster 'made ace' when No 112 Sqn intercepted a large enemy formation in concert with Nos 2 SAAF and 250 Sqns. Neville Duke fired at and hit a Ju 87. He then 'pounced on a Macchi 200 and had a pretty good dogfight. He started beetling off home and I chased him. Once he did a complete roll in front of me. My guns were all haywire, and in the end only one was working, which I had to keep cocking. Finally, that stopped just as we came roaring over Tobruk at nought feet. The Macchi (probably from 384° *Squadriglia*, and flown by Sottotenente Zancristofor – author) was still showing signs of fighting, however, but it suddenly spun off in a steep turn and crashed.'

The South Africans were busy too, and Lt Dennis Lacey made claims for two Ju 87s destroyed and three damaged, as his combat report tells;

'We were flying west when I saw them. My No 2 and I turned in behind the No 3, which was pulling up after a dive, and then we chased other Ju 87s. All the attacks were from the rear. Two went down. I had just sent one Ju 87 into the deck, and had set another on its way, when I was attacked by a C.200 from quarter astern, and he hit my port wing with two shots into my engine. My cannons (0.50-in nose guns – author) jammed. We were then about 25 miles from where the fight had started, so I turned for home. The first Ju 87 I shot down still had its bombs on, and when it hit the deck it went up with a terrific crash.'

Lacey left for home on 26 December.

Lt 'Danny' Saville also enjoyed success in this action. He reported that; 'At 0830 hrs I saw enemy aircraft ahead and above – some of the Ju 87s had just dropped their bombs. We then went in to attack, and I saw one Ju 87 which had been hit, and I gave it a burst on its way down. Then I did a quarter astern attack on a Ju 87 going west. It turned right and



Plt Off Neville Duke would eventually become the leading RAF ace in the Mediterranean, and he made his early claims with No 112 Sqn flying this Tomahawk IIB, AK402/GA-F. His first kill was scored on 21 November, when he shared in the destruction of a CR.42, and the next day he brought down a Bf 109F from I./JG 27. On 30 November Duke destroyed a G.50 and damaged another Bf 109, before he was himself shot down and the aircraft written off (N F Duke)



Plt Off Jack Bartle was credited with 6.5 victories flying with No 112 Sqn, and he personalised his Tomahawk (AN413/K) with an outline of a kangaroo to show his Australian roots. It also bore the name *NAN* below the cockpit. All his victories were scored with No 112, although he later commanded Kittyhawk-equipped No 450 Sqn (*N F Duke*)

dived, and I saw smoke coming from it. I then saw another Ju 87 heading west and attacked from the stern, seeing white smoke puffs from all over it. As it dived away I got dead astern above and gave it a burst. It started smoking, the nose yawed up and it turned over on its back and went straight down.'

Saville's adventures were not over, as he was then attacked by a Tomahawk! He evaded it and headed back to base.

There was another of these 'Stuka Parties' the following day, when 40 dive-bombers, and their

escorts, met Tomahawks from Nos 112 and 250 Sqn about 15 miles south of El Adem. In the ensuing, confused, fight some 14 were claimed, although actual losses were substantially less. Neville Bowker of No 112 claimed three and a G.50, Jack Bartle a Stuka and a G.50 and Bob Whittle of No 250 (in AN313) claimed two Ju 87s destroyed.

The honours, however, went to No 250's flight commander, Clive Caldwell, flying AK498/LD-C. He later recounted the action;

'I was leading the formation of two squadrons, 112 acting as top cover to 250 Sqn, to patrol a line approximately ten miles west of El Gubi. We had just reached this position at 1140 hrs when I received R/T warning that a large enemy formation was approaching from the north-west at our height. Both squadrons climbed immediately, and within a minute the enemy formation, consisting of Ju 87s with fighter escorts, was sighted on our starboard side. 250 Sqn went into line astern behind me, and as 112 engaged the escorts, we attacked the Ju 87s from the rear quarter.

'At 300 yards I opened fire with all my guns at the leader of one of the rear sections of three, allowing too little deflection, and hit No 2 and No 3, one of which immediately burst into flames, the other going down smoking and starting to flame after losing about 1000 ft. I then attacked the leader of the rear section from below and behind, opening fire with all my guns at very close range. The enemy aircraft turned over and dived steeply down with the root of the starboard wing in flames. Spotting another Stuka, I opened fire again at close range and the enemy caught fire and crashed in flames near some dispersed mechanised transport. I was then able to pull up under the belly of the aircraft at the rear, holding the burst until very close range. It dived gently straight ahead, streaming smoke, before catching fire and diving into the ground.'

Following this action Caldwell was credited with five destroyed, some at least of which were Regia Aeronautica *'Picchiarelli'* of 239° *Squadriglia Autonomo B a T*. His brilliance, and fighting qualities, were duly recognised, and on 26 December Caldwell had the distinction – unique in the RAAF – of receiving the DFC and bar simultaneously.

No 112 Sqn paid a high price for No 250's success, however, losing four fighters to the avenging Messerschmitts. Neville Duke, flying AN337/GA-F, was also forced to crash-land with wounds at Tobruk.

The Allies finally blunted the *Afrika Korps'* latest counter-offensive, and following the enemy's withdrawal towards Gazala, the first contact was made with the garrison in Tobruk on 8 December, and it was relieved at last on the 10th after seven months of siege. Shortly before 0800 hrs on the 9th, Flg Off John Waddy, a gifted young Australian pilot who had recently joined No 250 Sqn, was flying AK498 when he claimed the first of his 15.5 kills by sharing in the destruction of a reconnaissance Bf 110 of 2(F)/14 with Flt Lt Bary, who was eventually to achieve two and four shared victories.

It was again a day of heavy fighting, and among those forced down was 'Tiny' Cameron, although he returned a few days later. As previously mentioned, fellow ace Rex Wilson was not so lucky, and he was killed when shot down by Bf 109s. The Tomahawk squadrons continued to take a steady toll but, as No 3 was proving, they were also taking steady, occasionally heavy, losses. Typical of the quality of the pilots lost was Plt Off Geoffrey Ranger of No 250 Sqn, who joined the unit with 1.5 victories from his tour on Spitfires in the UK with No 41 Sqn. Between 11 and 14 December he destroyed four enemy aircraft, but on the 15th he was killed, officially in a 'landing accident'. However, II/JG 27 *experte* Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz claimed a Tomahawk on this day, and it seems likely that he bounced Ranger whilst the latter was preparing to land.

Despite these losses, Bf 109s were also being brought down too, as was shown on 12 December when No 4 Sqn SAAF launched ten Tomahawks from Gazala to provide close escort for a formation of Blenheims. Two enemy fighters were destroyed, one falling to Lt Douglas Golding and the other to the unit's rising star, Andrew Bosman, who reported afterwards;

'I saw a number of ME 109Fs below me and some above. I broke away to attack, having informed the leader, and a fight ensued. I surprised two enemy aircraft and opened fire in turn and I am certain I inflicted a fair amount of damage to each. One of our aircraft was shot up from below, and I circled below to assist him. At the end of the engagement I was attacked, and as the enemy aircraft zoomed past me I pulled in behind him and opened up. He stood on his tail and flicked over into a spin, from which he did not recover. I saw him burning on the hilly ground below.'

The following day Bob Whittle of No 250 Sqn made his final claim in the desert, while on the 16th Bosman shared in the destruction of a Bf 110 – his fifth success – to become No 4 Sqn's first ace. Douglas Golding 'made ace' two days later when he downed a Bf 109, while both pilots scored again on the 22nd – a Ju 87 and a Bf 109 respectively. Also flying on this sweep with the South Africans was No 112 Sqn, including Neville Duke in AK354/GA-L. Making several claims in this aircraft, he recalled;

'I observed an Me 109 (of III./JG 27, flown by Feldwebel Wassermann – author) taking off and pursued same across airadrome. Enemy aircraft crashed west of Magrum, near the coast. I then saw 15 Ju 52s off the coast. I dived on the Ju 52 at the rear of formation and observed smoke coming from the fuselage as the enemy aircraft started to go down.'

Duke was credited with a Bf 109 destroyed and the Ju 52 as a probable, while other successful pilots included Jerry Westenra and Jack Bartle who shared in the destruction of a Ju 87.

After the exertions of the previous weeks, there was a marked reduction in enemy activity towards the end of the month. However, during a large

ground strafing mission on the 27th, Neville Bowker, who had 10.5 victories to his credit, was hit by flak and became a PoW.

ENTER THE KITTYHAWK

In an effort to improve the performance of the Tomahawk, Curtiss had re-engined and refined the earlier model P-40. The first of the more powerful variants, the P-40D was, like the later models, named Kittyhawk in the Commonwealth air forces. On 17 December No 3 Sqn RAAF had withdrawn to re-equip as the first unit with the new fighter, which was to become the RAF's main air superiority fighter in the desert during the first half of 1942. No 3 flew its first sweep with the Kittyhawk on the 28th. The following day No 112 Sqn began re-equipping, and in early 1942 it welcomed a formidable new CO in the shape of newly-promoted Clive Caldwell. Upon leaving No 250 Sqn, his CO noted in his log book, 'An exceptional fighter pilot, whose leadership and skill in combat have been of the highest order'.

The final claims of 1941 went to No 4 Sqn SAAF when, during a wing sweep to the Agedabia area on the 30th, both of its aces, Capt Bosman and Lt Golding, shared a Ju 88. After the engagement Bosman wrote;

'I was Roger Blue Leader, with my flight in line astern over Msus aerodrome, when this Ju 88 was sighted. I gave chase and put in six separate dead astern attacks. Bits flew off and he slowed up as the port engine started to smoke heavily, eventually catching fire after Lt Golding delivered his attack. Two bailed out and one appeared dead.'

The Ju 88 was presumed to be on a reconnaissance mission to Msus.

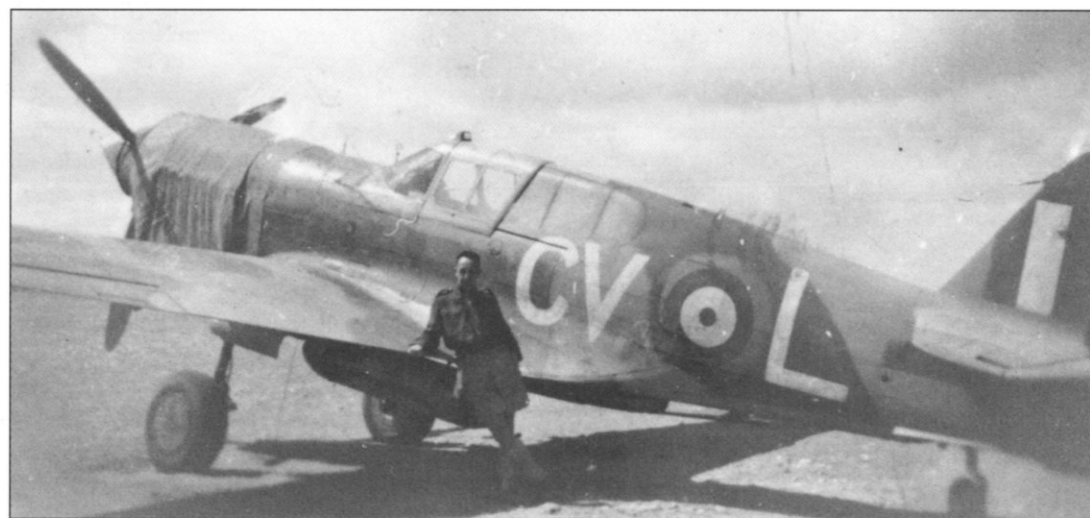
The unit's diarist recorded that since beginning operations No 4 had claimed the following aircraft as destroyed – 11 Bf 109s, five Bf 110s, one C.202, one Ju 87, two Ju 88s and a CANT Z.1007.

The Kittyhawk was finally blooded on New Year's Day 1942 when, on their second sweep of the day No 3's nine Kittyhawks, now flying in more flexible 'fluid pairs', met 16 Ju 87s and six Bf 109s east of Agedabia. 'Tiny' Cameron (in AK597) led the way into the fighters and ended the combat with a Ju 87 and a Bf 109 destroyed, as well as several damaged. Diving on a Bf 109 over Agedabia airfield, he fired 'a long burst at it and saw it flick

One of the leading Commonwealth Tomahawk/Kittyhawk pilots, with 11 victories, was Flg Off 'Nicky' Barr of No 3 Sqn RAAF, which he later commanded. His ninth kill came on 8 March 1942 in Kittyhawk I AK903/CV-L when he destroyed a C.200 north-west of Tobruk, probably destroyed a second and damaged two more. Barr's philosophy on fighting in the desert is an interesting one, and his views are perhaps indicative of most Australian aces who enjoyed success in North Africa;

'The Tomahawk and Kittyhawk were not considered by us to be top fighter aircraft. I decided early on in the piece that any deficiency either type had could be offset by unbridled aggression. I had done a little bit of boxing both before and during the war, and had beaten much better opponents by simply going for them, and I decided to use this tactic when in the air. It paid off.

'I would evade being shot down by pulling so much g-force that I could feel the blood leaving my forehead and coming down over my eyes. I would continue this for as long I could stand it, happy in the knowledge that anyone trying to get on my tail to shoot me down would be going through the same physical pain. Indeed, if my vision was bleary then so was my opponent's. Such an extreme tactic usually gave me the chance to effect an escape' (Author's collection)



Kittyhawk I AK673/GA-F is seen at Gazala on 2 February 1942. Among the pilots to have flown it was Flt Lt R M 'Blue' Leu, who claimed his fourth kill in the fighter on 25 January when he shot down a Bf 109F near Antelat. AK673 proved not so lucky for Sgt N Holman, however, for he was shot down and killed in it by Italian fighters on 11 February (Author's collection)



upside down as it went under me. The others had their wheels down, so I stalked the rear one. After a short burst he dropped his nose and crashed'.

Both Cameron and Flt Off 'Nicky' Barr (in AK599) destroyed two Ju 87s to become aces. Both pilots also commented on how unsatisfactory the reflector sight was. No 3's CO, Sqn Ldr 'Dixie' Chapman, was hit by return fire and force-landed, but later returned with his aircraft.

Gradually the Allied offensive petered out, as the protagonists replaced their losses – all the Tomahawk units were by now well below strength. On the 8th No 3 Sqn conducted a morning sweep, meeting a mixed formation of enemy fighters. In the ensuing clash Ron Simes downed a CR.42 and two C.200s to become the unit's newest ace.

The following day No 3 Sqn, in company with No 112, which was returning to action with Kittyhawks, flew an escort for Maryland bombers. Oberleutnant Gerhard Homuth of I./JG 27 fell on No 3, which lost two Kittyhawks, including that flown by Simes, who was killed. No 112 lost its first Kittyhawk later that day when Jerry Westenra, now a flight commander, led a second bomber escort mission.

A few days later on 11 January, 'Nicky' Barr, having destroyed two Bf 109s and a G.50, was brought down whilst attempting to pick up a downed pilot. He walked 25 miles back to the Allied lines, although 'Tiny' Cameron, who also went down on this mission, was less fortunate, becoming a PoW. Barr received a DFC as soon as he got back.

Rommel's depleted forces began a limited advance on the 21st, but the weakened Allied forces fell back, and so there was again an upsurge in activity with No 3 Sqn losing several aircraft, as did No 250 Sqn. The speculative enemy advance proved fruitful, and by the 28th Axis forces had retaken Benghazi. The first Kittyhawk victory by No 112 Sqn had come on 25 January when nine aircraft, led by Flt Lt Westenra, provided close escort to a Blenheim raid on Agedabia. When returning west of Msus, they were attacked by five Bf 109s, and Sgt 'Blue' Leu (in AK673) engaged one in a head-on attack, hitting its starboard wing. The fighter spun away and crashed. Neville Duke witnessed the action;

'Sgt Leu hit one head-on and shot the wing tip off. It was seen to go in near Msus. The rest of the Me 109s left us then.'

It was Leu's fifth confirmed claim.

Despite these successes in the air, there was a general Allied withdrawal eastwards on the ground, and Nos 3 and 112 Sqns settled at Gambut on 3 February. The various squadrons were constantly flying bomber escort or ground attack missions, and over the following weeks they were to suffer heavy losses. However, they too had their successes, with 14 February being described by No 112's diarist as 'a highly successful day'. Ten Kittyhawks from the unit, led by Plt Off Bartle (in AK700), and eight from No 3 Sqn RAAF scrambled against an approaching enemy formation. Other aces in No 112's formation were Plt Off Neville Duke (in AK578/GA-V) and Sgts Leuh in AK781) and Henry Burney (in AK702). After flying north to Tobruk, they turned west over the perimeter defences, and by the time the units had reached Acroma, No 3 was at 8000 ft and No 112 was slightly higher, and just below the cloud.

It was then that they spotted a dozen C.200s and C.202s ahead of them in a loose Vic formation some 2000 ft below. Jack Bartle alerted the Australians, who had also spotted a formation of bombers, with close escort, flying low over the desert. No 112 concentrated on the Italian fighters that by now were climbing to meet the attack, but as the Kittyhawks dived, the Macchi pilots manoeuvred into a half-hearted defensive circle.

In a devastating initial attack, every pilot within No 112 hit something, Henry Burney downing a C.200 which he thought was a Breda Ba.65 bomber! Neville Duke attacked another C.200, causing it to spin away and crash. He then went after a third Macchi that he spotted very close to the ground, the Italian fighter having been attacked by a No 3 Sqn machine. Firing from directly astern, Duke saw it hit the ground and explode, as he later noted in his diary;

'I was leading the left section and attacked ten Macchis just below us. I got onto the tail of a straggler and gave him a long burst. He was hit in the engine and spun away. He was seen to crash. The second Macchi was attacked from ground level from astern. After 2-3 attacks by aircraft CV-W of No 3 Sqn, the aircraft hit the ground and burst into flames.'

The Italians seemed mesmerised and maintained their circle, but they then broke and dived to low level, trying to shake off their attackers. 'Blue' Leu scored, his first C.200 blowing up and the second flying straight into the ground – he followed the latter down. Jack Bartle fired a lengthy burst

at another Macchi which went down, and then chased a Bf 109 all the way to Tmimi, although he could only claim it damaged.

Although there was the inevitable overclaiming, from the estimated force of 32 enemy aircraft, 20 were claimed destroyed, two probably destroyed and the rest damaged by the two squadrons, for no loss. It had been a clinical and almost textbook fight, with both the top and close escort formations being engaged before the bombers. No 112 Sqn was particularly pleased with its share of

Aces three! Flt Off Neville Duke (26 victories and three shared), Flt Lt Jerry Westenra (eight and three shared) and Sgt 'Blue' Leu (six and one shared) pose for the camera at LG 122 in early 1942 (N F Duke)



the bag – 11.5 destroyed – as many of its pilots were new. The day's combats brought Duke his final claims on the Kittyhawk, for the following month he was taken off operations for a rest. His final tally from his tour with No 112 was five and three shared destroyed.

That same day – 14 February – saw a new Kittyhawk unit arrive in the frontline when No 94 Sqn flew into Gambut. It was commanded by the leading ace from the early desert fighting, Sqn Ldr E M Mason, who had 15 and 2 shared kills to his credit. The following afternoon the aggressive 'Imshi' Mason led the unit's first Kittyhawk operation after a short conversion period – a strafing attack on Martuba, along with No 112 Sqn.

As Mason's eight aircraft swept over the enemy airfield, they were bounced by Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz of II./JG 27, and four were brought down, as was one from No 112 Sqn. Mason was killed, and the following day No 94 was withdrawn for further training under new CO, Sqn Ldr Ian MacDougall. Meanwhile, more Kittyhawk units appeared. No 450 Sqn RAAF arrived at Gambut under the command of Sqn Ldr Gordon Steege, who had scored seven kills flying Gladiators and Hurricanes with No 3 RAAF, while No 260 also began training up on the Curtiss fighter.

On 21 February Clive Caldwell again demonstrated his prowess when he shot down the Bf 109F of 2./JG 27 *experte* Oberleutnant Hans-Arnold Stahl Schmidt, the future 59-kill ace crash-landing in flames, watched by Duke and Bobby Gibbes. The German had entered the combat with a height advantage, but Caldwell nosed his aircraft into a dive before pulling up into a vertical climb, firing at the Messerschmitt as he did so. Caldwell later described the enemy as

Flt Off Neville Duke made his only Kittyhawk claim flying Mk I AK578/GA-V when, on 14 February 1942, he destroyed a C.200 and shared in the downing of another. The aircraft was photographed by Duke at Gambut at around the time of this action (N F Duke)

No 94 Sqn's CO in February 1942 was the renowned early desert war Hurricane ace Sqn Ldr E M 'Imshi' Mason DFC. This photograph was taken shortly before the operation on which he was killed when, over Martuba on 15 February, four out of eight Kittyhawks from this unit were shot down by Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz of II./JG 27 (J F Edwards)



'shuddering like a carpet being whacked with a beater', while even the *experten* Gerhard Homuth and the legendary Hans-Joachim Marseille recorded it as a 'fabulous shot'.

Gibbes, no mean pilot himself, later told Caldwell, 'I saw what you were trying to do but never thought you could do it'. However, Homuth and Marseille exacted swift retribution by downing three Kittyhawks.

Gibbes was promoted to command No 3 Sqn later that week, while on the 22nd Sgt Ray Shaw (in AK726/DJ-O) opened No 450's account when he intercepted a Ju 88 at 20,000 ft over Gazala and shot it down.

EXPANSION AND REORGANISATION

On 1 March there was further reorganisation of the Western Desert Air Force, with Nos 3 Sqn RAAF joining Nos 112, 250 and 450 Sqn in a newly formed No 239 Wing under the leadership of Australian Wg Cdr H C Mayers, who had scored nine victories in Hurricanes in the Battle of Britain and in the desert. Nos 2 and 4 SAAF Sqn, together with Nos 94 and the newly re-equipped 260 Sqn, formed No 233 Wing. A new Tomahawk unit also reached the frontline in early March in the shape of No 5 Sqn SAAF, led by formidable CO Maj John E Frost. Joining No 233 Wing, No 5 was responsible for patrolling the sector from Sollum to Mersa Matruh.

Maj Frost was the leading fighter pilot from the campaign against the Italians in East Africa, and his score stood at around nine aerial kills, 20+ aircraft destroyed on the ground. His wingman in No 5 Sqn was Lt Ken Whyte, who was also to achieve success. He said of his CO;

'He was a dedicated permanent force SAAF officer. Jack was a great leader with an enthusiastic and aggressive spirit. He chose me as his No 2, and I flew with him on most of his operations. He was completely fearless, the opposing numbers of aircraft appearing not to concern him, and he would dive straight for them, usually becoming involved in a dogfight. It was often difficult to follow him and at the same time watch our tails, so we often became separated.'

The new unit was soon in action. During the late afternoon of 5 March 'Blue' section was scrambled to Fuka, where Ju 88s of I./LG 1 had been sighted. Reaching 1500 ft, the Allied pilots spotted an enemy bomber off to the right climbing for the safety of the clouds. Capt Andrew Duncan, who had already claimed four kills, led the way;

'I went in first and got in a good burst from the stern quarter, damaging the port engine. The enemy did steep turns and started losing height. The second attack was from the beam, most shots hitting the rear gunner's section, and he bailed out. I did a stall turn, then came up from underneath and set him on fire in the belly – he lost height rapidly, and after two more short bursts two more of the crew bailed out and it burst into flames and crashed.'



The top SAAF ace of World War 2 was the CO of No 5 Sqn, the redoubtable Maj Johnny Frost, who was a leading pilot in the campaign in East Africa in 1941. In charge of No 5 Sqn in the desert, he took his score to 14 and two shared kills before he was killed in action by Bf 109Fs from JG 27 on 16 June 1942. Frost was considered an outstanding fighter leader (via C F Shores)

Kittyhawk I AK906/DJ-S is seen after it had suffered combat damage during a mission in March 1942 whilst being flown by Sgt E J Quirk. Earlier in the month it had been used on several occasions by future ace Sgt Don McBurnie (A W J Taylor)

Tomahawk IIB AM401/GL-F of No 5 Sqn SAAF was being flown on 11 March 1942 by Capt Johnny Human when he damaged a Ju 88 to record his first claim. He subsequently gained four victories with No 2 Sqn SAAF, before returning to No 5 as CO. He claimed his all important fifth victory (an Me 323 transport) with the unit on 22 April 1943. This particular Tomahawk was struck off charge in June 1942 (SAAF)



The victory was shared with Lt Thornhill-Cook. It was a good start for the new South African squadron, which was soon to be involved in the thick of the fighting over the desert during the summer, sustaining very heavy losses.

No 450 Sqn was also in action, and three days later another future ace began his career. Sgt Don McBurnie was flying AK717/DJ-V when he shot down the first of his 5.5 victories, which he claimed was a CR.42, although he was credited at his CO's insistence with a C.200 instead!

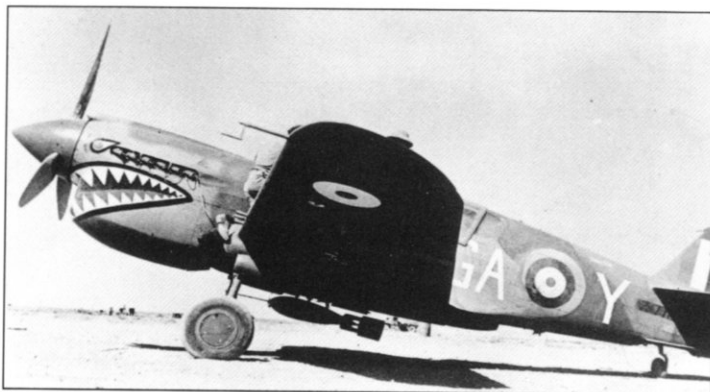
Other future alumni also began their desert fighting careers over the next few days. On 11 March No 5 Sqn SAAF's John Hewitson (in

AK448/GL-H) shot down a Ju 88 for the second of his five victories, and Frost shared a probable with Lt Ken Whyte. Two other bombers were damaged by the squadron, one by future ace Capt Johnny Human (flying AM401/GL-F) for his first claim. Of his CO's first combat in the desert, Ken Whyte later recounted;

'I remember our first combat together. While on a shipping patrol, we were vectored onto a He 111 (*sic*) which was following a Malta convoy. Jack made his favourite three-quarter head-on attack which had brought him success in Abyssinia. I attacked from the rear, and we watched the enemy aircraft slowly going down over the sea with pieces falling off it. We each claimed a half share in its destruction.'

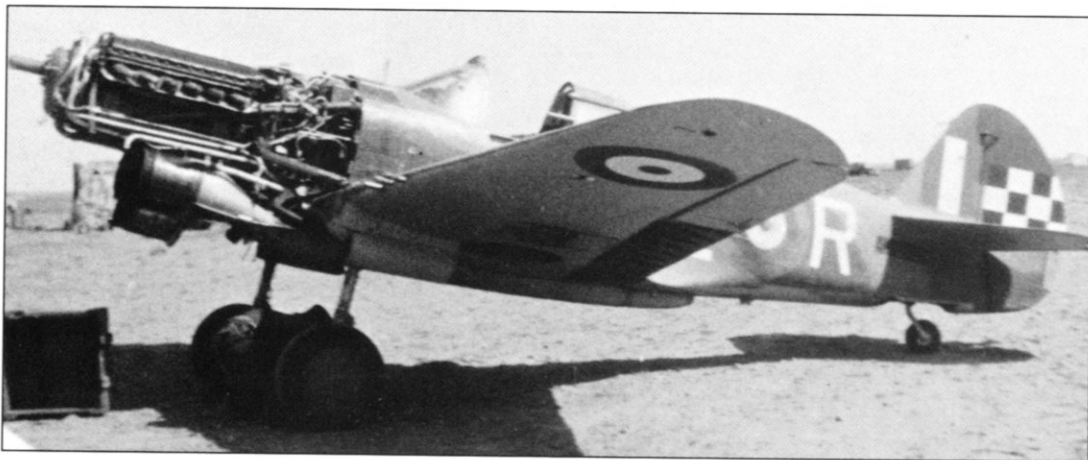
Soon after that, No 2 Sqn SAAF returned to operations after two months of work-up training. Among its pilots was the new 'A' Flight commander, Flt Lt Charles Laubscher, a South African in the RAF who hailed from the Transvaal.





He had flown Hurricanes in the desert and Malta, where he had claimed 2.5 victories.

On 14 March Polish pilot Sgt Urbanczyk, together with Clive Caldwell (flying AK772/GA-Y), shared in the destruction of a C.202, with the CO claiming a second Macchi fighter destroyed. The following day No 112 Sqn was transferred out of the frontline to Sidi Haneish for a rest, and its handful of Polish pilots did not return to duty with the unit.



Kittyhawk I AK772/GA-Y of the famous 'desert sharks' of No 112 Sqn was flown by several notable pilots, including the CO, Sqn Ldr Clive Caldwell. Indeed, he was flying it to Martuba on 14 March 1942 when he destroyed a C.202 and shared in the destruction of a Bf 109. Caldwell was again at the controls when he made his final claim in the desert on 23 April, shooting down a Bf 109 over Bir Hacheim. Another ace who enjoyed success while flying AK772 was Plt Off Henry Burney, who destroyed a Bf 109 near Tobruk on 13 March. Burney was, however, shot down and killed in it during the heavy fighting around Gazala on 30 May (No 112 Sqn records)

Left

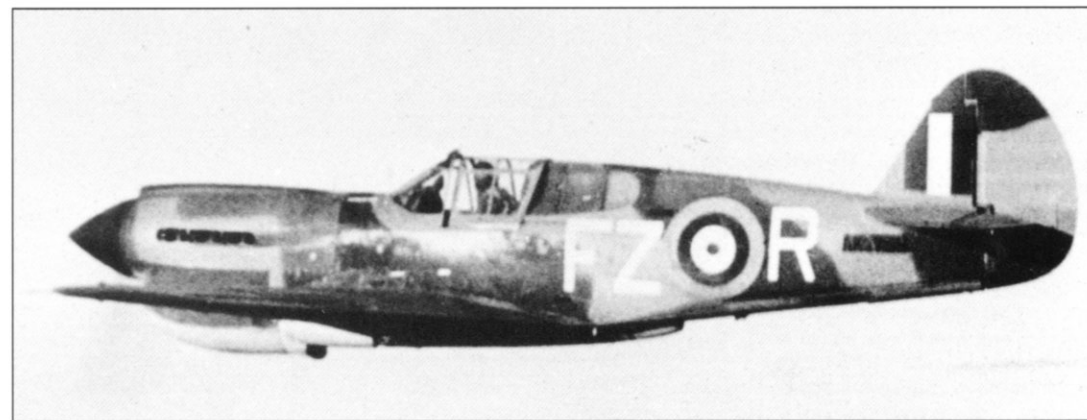
The Commonwealth's leading scorer on the Tomahawk/Kittyhawk, and most successful RAAF ace of the war, was Clive Caldwell. While he was in command of No 112 Sqn in North Africa in early 1942, eight Polish pilots briefly served with the unit. As a mark of their respect, they presented him with the metal wings of the Polish Air Force (No 112 Sqn records)

Kittyhawk I AK739/FZ-R was flown on a training sortie by Sgt 'Eddie' Edwards on 20 March 1942. For some reason No 94 Sqn's aircraft were decorated with red and white rudder checks, leading the Germans to report combat with 'Polish Curtisses!' This aircraft was shot down near Gazala by a Bf 109 from I./JG 27 on 21 March (via Ian Simpson)



The third highest scoring Commonwealth pilot on the Tomahawk/Kittyhawk was young Canadian 'Eddie' Edwards, who initially served with No 94 Sqn as a sergeant pilot. Here, he is climbing into one of the unit's Kittyhawk Is at around the time he made his first claim (J F Edwards)

Kittyhawk I AK739/FZ-R of No 94 Sqn was one of the aircraft flown by Sgt 'Eddie' Edwards. His first victory came soon after this photo was taken in February 1942, when he shot down a Bf 109 during a familiarisation flight whilst No 94 Sqn was still working up with its Kittyhawks (via Ian Simpson)



10 March was a particularly significant date for future operations, for on this day Sqn Ldr Caldwell made the first training drops with 250-lb bombs as a precursor to a new role for the Kittyhawk. Twenty-four hours later newly-promoted Flg Off Duke was awarded the DFC, while a DFM went to 'Blue' Leu.

Putting its disastrous first mission in February behind it, No 94 moved forward to Gasr el Arid to resume operations on 20 March. It suffered more losses on the 21st, and on the 23rd the CO led eight Kittyhawks (some of which were from No 260 Sqn, the unit having begun operations a few days earlier) on an escort mission for Bostons of No 24 Sqn SAAF that had been sent to bomb Martuba. Flying AK858/FZ-F on his first operation was a young RCAF NCO, Sgt J F 'Eddie' Edwards. During the 1 hour 40 minute sortie, he destroyed a Bf 109F from III./JG 27, as he recorded in his logbook. 'Shot an Me 109F down. It blew up in mid air'. Edward's combat report was more descriptive;

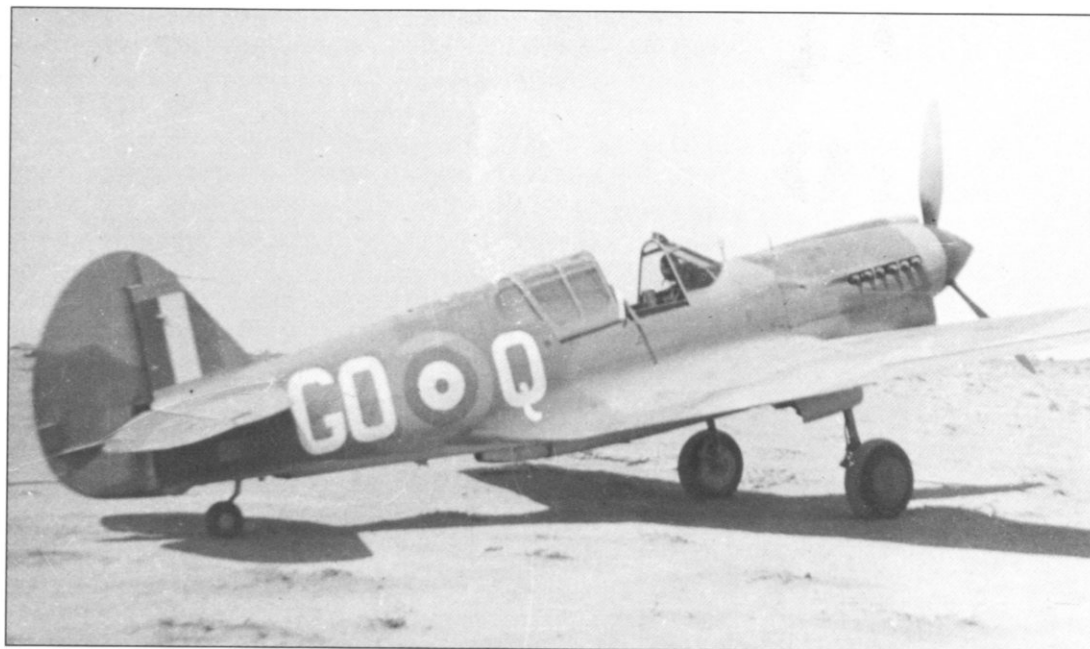
'Whilst over Martuba, an Me 109F came up from underneath on my No 1's tail ahead of me. I swung onto his tail and gave him a short burst. He broke away and took evasive action. I observed his flaps to come down and he started a steep dive. I closed to within 50 yards and gave him a long burst. The Me 109F blew up in front of me.'

This was the first of more than a dozen Kittyhawk victories for Edwards, who would end his time on the Curtiss fighter as the third ranking Commonwealth ace on the type.

Later in the month No 250 Sqn quickly converted onto the Kittyhawk as the various units continued fighting over the desert battlefield. There was further heavy fighting in early April, with Rommel's forces pushing forward and consolidating their positions. No 2 Sqn SAAF was heavily engaged, and during a battle with around 20 C.202s between Tobruk and Gazala on the 4th, Lt 'Danny' Saville shot down two and damaged another to become the squadron's newest ace.

The fighting was not one-sided on this date, however, and Saville's colleague, Charles Laubscher, had a torrid few minutes later in the day while acting as the 'weaver' on a No 2 Sqn sweep flown in conjunction with Nos 94 and 4 SAAF Sqn;

'We were attacked during the homeward run by an Me 109F, diving almost vertically, about five miles south-east of Martuba. I turned tightly to port in the standard evasive action and saw him half roll onto his back,



which enabled him to lay off a deflection shot. I pulled on my stick to tighten the turn and my Tomahawk promptly went into a spin.

'Straightening out at about 5000 ft, I found myself in a hornet's nest of Me 109Fs flying in sections of three, line astern at different altitudes. I saw at once that one section would pass almost directly ahead of me at a range of approximately 250 yards, so I laid off a full deflection on their No 3 and fired a long burst, but I didn't wait to see what happened to him, heading back to our lines at full throttle.'

Laubscher was then attacked by more Bf 109s, but he managed to evade them. When he returned to base he was able to claim his first Tomahawk (and third total) victory;

'I thought I could only claim a probable and a damaged, but a telephone call from the bomber wing we had been escorting stated that a rear gunner had seen an aircraft go in south east of Martuba. As no other aircraft had fired a shot, this was clearly my Me 109F, and I was able to claim it as destroyed.'

Changes continued through the month, with No 250 Sqn returning to operations in the middle of April, while on the 23rd Clive Caldwell brought down a Bf 109, the last of his 22 victories (19 and three shared) in more than 400 operational flying hours in the Tomahawk and Kittyhawk. He then handed over command of his unit and eventually returned to Australia as the leading RAAF ace of World War 2. Shortly before his departure his countryman Jack Bartle was promoted to flight lieutenant and made a flight commander.

No 2 Sqn SAAF also received a new CO when Maj Andrew Bosman moved over from No 4 SAAF, much to the delight of the squadron, as its diary confirms;

'The feeling throughout is that we have had more than our fair share of luck in having Maj Bosman posted in, as he is acknowledged not only by us, but by the RAF, as being *the* best fighter pilot in the desert.'

No 94 Sqn changed its unit code letters in late April 1942, reverting to GO in place of FZ. This Mk I, coded GO-Q, is seen at Gasr el Arid during April. It had been flown by 'Eddie' Edwards on 11 April while still coded FZ-Q (J F Edwards)

TO ALAMEIN - AND VICTORY

In spite of several units flying the Kittyhawk successfully, No 94 Sqn continued to have a difficult time, and so in early May it passed its aircraft to No 2 Sqn SAAF and withdrew to be re-equipped with Hurricane IICs. However, several pilots moved 'across the strip' to join No 260 Sqn under Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury, an excellent fighter pilot and CO with eight victories. Fellow ace 'Eddie' Edwards said of him;

'In No 260 Sqn we were fortunate in having Sqn Ldr Hanbury as commanding officer. He was probably one of the best all-round fighter leaders in the desert. He was CO when I joined and went off ops about 17 August for a rest. In the air he was the "steely grey" type, intent on destroying the enemy, and he expected the same from all his pilots. There were no excuses, no short cuts, no line shooting allowed or displayed at any time. He commanded respect from everyone on the squadron.'

No 3 Sqn RAAF had continued fighting, its CO Bobby Gibbes making his first claim for some time on 7 May when his unit performed a joint



Two stalwarts of No 260 Sqn during 1942 were the unit CO, Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury (seen here with his mandatory pipe), and Flt Lt Ron Cundy. Hanbury had just returned to the unit for a second period in command when this photograph was taken in late 1942 (J F Edwards)



Kittyhawk I AK919/LD-B of No 250 Sqn serves as a 'canvas' for a group photo of pilots from this unit taken at LG 91 in mid 1942. The fighter had been fitted with a Hurricane-style centreline drop tank. Note also the red arrow marking encircling the exhaust stubs. Although most of these pilots are unidentified, sitting on the fuselage at the extreme right is Australian Battle of Britain ace Wg Cdr Howard Mayers, who was then OC No 239 Wing (Ian Simpson)



patrol with No 112 Sqn. Vectored towards Gazala, they soon intercepted two enemy fighters, which they shot down. One fell to Gibbes which, although credited as a Bf 109, appears to have been a C.202.

As a result of the heavy losses being inflicted on its supply ships, the enemy had been forced to resort to flying in reinforcements in large formations of transports. Once the Allies got wind of this, a plan was drawn up to intercept and disrupt them. On 12 May ten Kittyhawks from No 250 Sqn, fitted with long-range tanks and led by Wg Cdr Howard Mayers (in AK890/LD-T), escorted six Beaufighters out over the Mediterranean. The top flight was led by Flg Off John Waddy (in AK846/LD-H), while another notable in the formation was Plt Off 'Cas' Casbolt (flying LD-Q). He had 11 victories from the Greek campaign.

Several aircraft were forced to return, but after two hours the remainder encountered a formation of 16 Ju 52/3ms and three Bf 110s. In a devastating first pass six of the transports went down before a series of individual combats ensued. In spite of the inevitable overclaiming, nine Junkers fell into the sea and two more force-landed on a beach.

Mayers was credited with his first Kittyhawk victory, which he noted as follows in his log book, 'hit 15-20 Ju 52s & 2 Me 110s. Destroyed 13 Ju 52 & 2 Me 110. Self 1 Ju 52 dest, 1 dam'. Two fell to Casbolt for his final claims of the war, while No 250's CO, Sqn Ldr Mike Judd, also claimed two transports for his first confirmed victories. The day undoubtedly belonged to John Waddy, however, who became an ace in spectacular fashion by destroying two Ju 52/3ms and two Bf 110s. Having spotted the transports, his combat report stated;

'I gave the "Tally Ho!" and immediately climbed to 1000 ft to look for the Me 110s. I made a head attack on a Ju 52 and my first burst went straight into the cockpit.

'My No 2 confirms this as destroyed as it went into the water. I then observed an Me 110 attacking a Beaufighter, so I made a right hand turn

This view of Kittyhawk I AK919/LD-B of No 250 'Sudan' Sqn shows its regular pilot, Sqn Ldr Mike Judd, strapped into the cockpit and ready to scramble. Leading the unit from April to November 1942, he used this machine on 6 June to damage a Bf 109 and a C.202 in the Acroma-Knightsbridge area. The red arrow marking around the exhaust stubs is more visible from this angle (No 250 Sqn records)

Sqn Ldr Mike Judd made most of his claims flying Kittyhawks with No 250 Sqn in 1942. His fifth kill was apparently made while commanding No 121 Wing in Europe in late 1944 (via C F Shores)



and delivered a rear quarter attack. My first burst hit the fuselage and the Me 110 pulled up in a steep climbing turn, which I followed. I then put a burst into his port motor which caught fire. Gave the Me 110 another burst and he dived into the sea.'

The lengthy report then described other actions before ending;

'When I left the fight only three enemy aircraft were flying, all Ju 52s.'

On 16 May 1942 No 112 Sqn was declared operational in the fighter-bomber role as the Desert Air Force's first 'Kittybomber' unit, and on the 25th Sqn Ldr Billy Drake took over. The following day the enemy assault on the Allies' Gazala-Bir Hacheim line began, leading to six weeks of heavy fighting, and a rapid retreat for the Commonwealth forces.

One casualty that day was Bobby Gibbes who, having probably destroyed a Bf 109, was hit by return fire from a Ju 88 and forced to bail out. He was soon picked up, but his broken leg kept him out of action until late August. 'Nicky' Barr was appointed as the temporary CO, just six months after joining No 3 Sqn as a lowly pilot officer!

On 27 May No 5 Sqn's CO Johnny Frost (in AK195/GL-W) scrambled at the head of 12 Tomahawks on an interception patrol over Bir Hacheim, where they were warned about the presence of a dozen or so intruders. At 0950 hrs, and flying at 14,500 ft, Frost spotted a formation of twin-engined aircraft slightly below and approaching from the left. With Blue section remaining as top cover, he led the other sections into the bombers, Red section going for the head of the formation and White section for the rear. Frost's report read;

'I fired one burst from astern at close range on the last bomber, its starboard engine caught fire and large pieces flew off. It rolled over and was seen to crash.'

Frost's Tomahawk was then hit by cannon fire, which damaged the port elevator and wingtip. His victim, whose demise was witnessed by future ace Capt John Hewitson (who in AK448/GL-H shot down a Bf 109 for his third), was Frost's ninth victory.

Earlier No 2 Sqn SAAF had been in a fight and Johnny Human, now the CO (and flying DB-G), claimed his first victory when he shot down a Bf 109 near Gazala.

The fighting intensified, and a couple of days later No 450 Sqn conducted an early morning patrol over Acroma and duly ran into an escorted formation of Ju 87s. The squadron's ten Kittyhawks immediately engaged the dive-bombers, from II./StG 3, chasing them as far as Gazala. Two were brought down,



Also marked with No 250 Sqn's red arrow around its exhaust stubs, Kittyhawk I AK846/LD-H was the usual mount of Flg Off John Waddy during May 1942. The ace is seen posing with the fighter probably after his outstanding action of 12 May, when he was credited with two Ju 52/3ms and two escorting Bf 110s destroyed. He was also flying this aircraft when he shot down a Bf 109 nine days later (I Primmer)

Kittyhawk I AK998/OK-O of No 450 Sqn was photographed by Sqn Ldr Gordon Steege (the unit CO and an eight-victory ace) over Sidi Barrani in late May 1942 whilst being flown by Sgt Shaw. On the 23rd of that month it had been used by Sgt Don McBurnie to claim his second victory when he downed a Bf 109 over Tmimi (G H Steege)



with Sgt Don McBurnie sharing one – he also brought down the Bf 109F flown by Leutnant von Fritsch. Other Messerschmitts then intervened, downing three Kittyhawks, including that of Sgt Ray Shaw who had claimed No 450 Sqn's first victory. He died in AK998/OK-O.

FALL OF ACES

The following evening No 2 Sqn SAAF helped cover a Boston raid on a vehicle concentration west of Knightsbridge, and as they approached the target they spotted six Stukas, which promptly jettisoned their bombs, escorted by four Bf 109s.

The wing leader called out a warning, and 'Johnny' Human, who was leading No 2 Sqn, remembered what happened next;

'I looked round and saw an Me 109F attacking from above at a quarter stern. I started a medium turn to the right, which converted into a steep climbing turn as he got within range. As soon as he passed underneath me I whipped round to the left and got in a good burst as he tried to turn right towards me. I saw him flick onto his back before I turned to look behind me. When I turned round again I saw a flash of flame as it hit the ground.'

Human was credited with the kill to claim his second victory.

Heavy sandstorms did little to blunt the pace of the intense air operations, and much of the fighting took place at low level. On 31 May there were a number of significant changes on No 5 Sqn SAAF when Frost, after a year in command, was posted to No 233 Wing. Promoted from flight commander to take his place was Andrew Duncan. John Hewitson was also promoted at this time to take over No 4 Sqn SAAF, while Robin Pare, an ace with 5.5 victories, was promoted to captain and became a flight commander within No 5 Sqn. However, that very evening Duncan was lost in AK523/GL-R, shot down by *experte* Oberleutnant Otto Schulz of II./JG 27, and so Frost resumed command of No 5 Sqn.

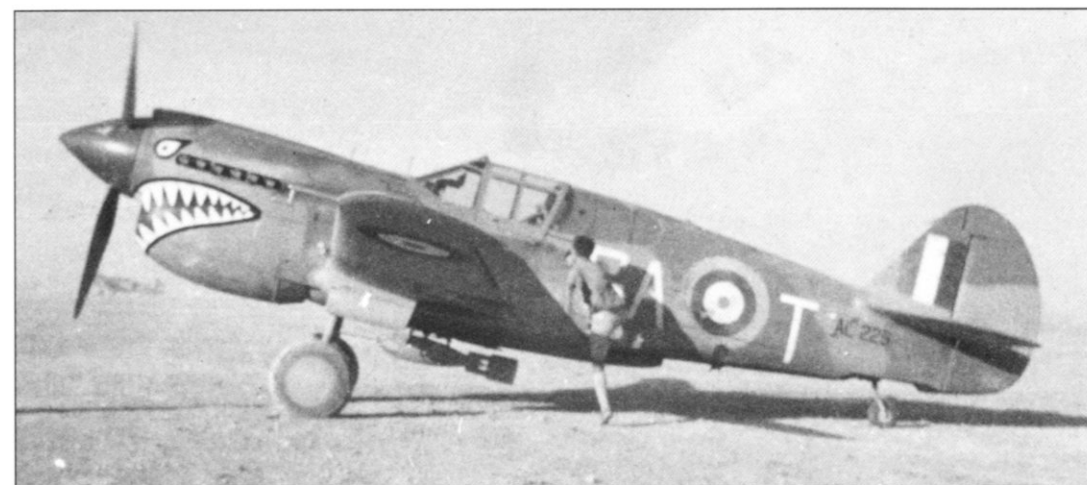
The end of May also saw Jack Bartle leave No 112 Sqn, being replaced as flight commander by fellow RAAF ace 'Blue' Leu.

Meanwhile, Frost had begun scoring again. On 3 June he was



This photograph of Kittyhawks from No 2 Sqn SAAF dispersed on their desert strip was taken in June 1942 from an overflying Allied aircraft. The nearest fighter is AL186/DB-G, which was flown occasionally by Maj D W Human. Beyond it is AL173/DB-Q of Lt Vernon Lindsay, who used the machine to damage a Bf 109 on 7 June. Like his CO, Lindsay later became an ace (via C F Shores)

Maj D W 'Johnny' Human commanded both Nos 2 and 5 Sqs SAAF, flying Tomahawks and Kittyhawks, as well as Hurricane-equipped No 1 Sqn SAAF. He eventually claimed five victories with the Tomahawk and Kittyhawk, before becoming the wing leader of No 7 Wing SAAF (via C F Shores)



Kittyhawk I AL225/GA-T of No 112 Sqn was flown by Flt Lt 'Blue' Leu during the 21 June 1942 attack on the Axis airstrip at Sidi Azeiz. Leu, whose score then stood at 6.5 aircraft destroyed, was badly wounded when his fighter was hit by flak and set alight. He force-landed and was captured, spending the next two months in a German hospital, before being shipped to Italy as a PoW (Author's collection)

flying AK247/GL-K over Bir Hacheim, which the Free French were defending so gallantly, when a formation of Stukas was spotted. Frost led the Tomahawks in and a series of individual combats took place at no more than 100 ft. His wingman's logbook recorded the event;

'Maj Frost shot down three enemy aircraft. I saw a Stuka go down in flames. Most of my aircraft's rudder was shot away.'

Also taking part was Capt Louis Botha (in AK448/GL-M) on his first combat, and what a debut it was. His report graphically describes what happened;

'My leader pulled away from me, and when I caught up with him I saw him giving one a burst. As nothing happened when the Stuka pulled away to the left, I closed in from astern and gave him a good burst. He burst into flames and went down.'

'I then picked one on the left of the formation and gave him a burst and he too went down in flames. I then looked behind and saw a Me 109 diving down to attack and I escaped by going underneath the Stukas.'

'I pulled to the left and then went right to get behind them. I picked another, gave him a burst and he also went down in flames. The next one I closed in from underneath and gave him a squirt and pulled up. The pilot pulled his stick back and we nearly collided, and I failed to see what happened to him.'

'By this time the enemy aircraft were very low and split up. I again pulled out to the left and up to gain height. This time I selected one in the centre. After giving him a second burst, smoke came out and he burst into flames.'

By then Botha was out of ammunition. The intense manoeuvring had made his Allison engine overheat, so he landed in the desert to let it cool off before flying back to Gambut.

Botha's first claims saw him credited with three destroyed and one shared (with Wg Cdr Tommy Beresford), sending him well on his way to acedom. His exploits also earned him an immediate DFC.

Sadly, six No 5 Sqn pilots (including ace Robin Pare) fell to the guns of Luftwaffe *experte* Hauptmann Hans-Joachim Marseille, although Pare is thought to have first brought down a Bf 109. 'Eddie' Edwards of No 260 Sqn wrote;



No 4 Sqn SAAF was serving in No 233 Wing when this photo of Tomahawk IIB AK428/KJ-K was taken in mid 1942. Lt J D Robertson was at the controls of this machine when, on 13 June, he shared in the destruction of a Bf 109 with Lt Kaufman (*K Smy*)

top cover to No 4 Sqn SAAF. About half an hour after take off, whilst patrolling at 8000 ft over Bir Hacheim, the fighters spotted a number of Ju 87s in the dive and both squadrons followed them down. In the subsequent fight, Frost was credited with three destroyed, as he recalled shortly afterwards:

'I had fired at and hit an Me 109 just above the Stukas but without result, so I then closed on a Ju 87 from the rear, gave him just one burst and he burst into flames and crashed.

'I then closed on another aircraft from the starboard side and as he turned towards me, so I put in a burst with deflection. I was then very close, and gave him another burst and he went down and hit the ground. I then closed on another Stuka and gave him a good burst from astern and he went down and crash-landed.'

On the return flight Louis Botha (in AK448/GL-H) encountered a CR.42, which he shot down to become the latest South African ace – in only his second engagement!

The Kittyhawks of No 239 Wing primarily concentrated on fighter-bomber attacks against enemy armoured forces in the tank battles around Knightsbridge on 6 June. Despite focusing more on the ground war, No 112 Sqn's CO, the charismatic Sqn Ldr Billy Drake, succeeded in downing a Bf 109 – its demise was later confirmed by the Army – to give him his fifth victory. It was his first on the Kittyhawk, although he was to score freely over the next six months and, with 15 victories on the type, he was to become the leading RAF pilot on the Curtiss fighter, second only to Caldwell among Commonwealth aces.

A bomber escort near El Adem on 7 June brought more success for Maj Human in AL186/DB-G. Having kept No 2 Sqn SAAF behind to cover the retreat of a large formation of Boston medium bombers, he destroyed a Bf 109, as he later recalled;

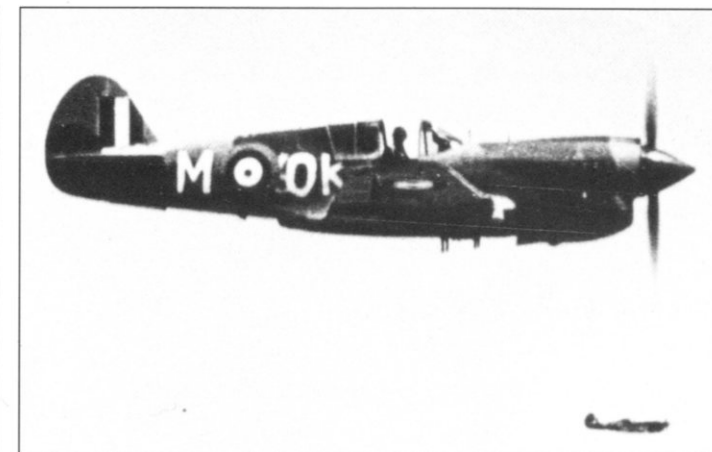
'One of them dived down and pulled up past me from below. I followed him and got in a long, good burst from the quarter stern. I saw the tracer bounce off his cockpit, after which he rolled on his back and went straight down. I didn't wait to see the result, but quickly turned to look behind me. However, when I turned back I saw a flash of flame as an aircraft dived into the ground.'

Another member of No 2 Sqn who would subsequently become an ace claimed his first kill later that day when aircraft from all three South African squadrons scrambled towards an approaching bomber formation

'June 1942 was another difficult period for everyone when the Germans were preparing for their advance, and No 260 Sqn was primarily assigned to bomber escort duties over enemy concentrations. The enemy lines were only 25-30 minutes flying time from the Gambut airfields.'

More action took place the following day, with 12 Tomahawks from No 5 Sqn SAAF being led aloft by John Frost (in AN247/GL-K) as

This Kittyhawk I (believed to be AK634/OK-M) is being flown by Flt Lt J E A 'Willy' Williams, who claimed four kills and two damaged during his service with No 450 Sqn between June and October 1942. Flying this machine on 5 July, he shot down a Ju 88 from I./LG 1 for his second kill. Williams became the unit CO in October, but on the 31st of that same month he was shot down and made a PoW (*A W J Taylor*)



This close up view of AK634 shows Flt Lt 'Willy' Williams posing next to his bomb-armed Kittyhawk, which displays appropriate nose art. Having become a PoW, he escaped from *Stalag Luft III* during the Great Escape of 25 March 1944, but on recapture Williams was one of the 50 Allied prisoners murdered by the Gestapo (*A W J Taylor*)



which was encountered near El Adem. Lt Vernon Lindsay (in AL134/DB-H) shot down a Bf 109 at 1910 hrs, and later reported;

'Just west of El Adem we observed bomb bursts, but had no time to get there as the formation was attacked from head on by two Macchi 202s. One turned slightly away about 75 yards ahead of me and appeared to be firing wildly. I turned onto him and after a two-second burst he appeared

to be alight and poured black smoke. The pilot was then seen to bail out.'

During the fight Maj John Hewitson, CO of No 4 Sqn, shot down a Bf 109 for his fifth and final claim.

The South Africans continued to be heavily engaged over the next few weeks, suffering numerous losses to the Bf 109s. Undoubtedly the most serious of these occurred on 16 June when the redoubtable John Frost led another operation, and became involved in a hectic fight. The action is recalled by one of his pilots, Rod Hojem:

'There was one hell of a dogfight, and after it was all over I can clearly remember Jack calling up the squadron on R/T. "Form up chaps, I am heading north", and that was the last we heard from him.'

Some reports say he fell in flames. A German report claimed he fell to one of two aces, either Günther Steinhausen or the mercurial Hans-Joachim Marseille. Whatever the truth, John Frost, the most successful SAAF pilot of World War 2, was

gone. A stunned No 5 Sqn could not believe it, but its record book states that;

'His aggressive spirit lived on throughout No 5 Sqn's exceptional operational record. Its COs and pilots were motivated by his image.'

The award of a bar to his DFC was to come soon.

However, the jinx of No 5 Sqn's 'ace' COs continued. The irrepressible Louis Botha had just been appointed when, the following day (17th), he was part of a four aircraft patrol that was bounced by Bf 109Fs from I./JG 27 on a *freie jagd* and three were lost, including the new CO.

The day saw bitter fighting, and soon after No 5 Sqn SAAF's losses No 450 Sqn had two pilots shot down, although later in the day the Luftwaffe's 51-victory *experte* Oberleutnant Otto Schulz was shot down and killed by an unidentified Kittyhawk pilot, possibly 'Eddie' Edwards of No 260 Sqn.

In the early afternoon two Kittyhawks and several Hurricanes fell to Marseille while conducting crucial ground strafing sorties. The exhausted units then withdrew to strips around Sidi Azeiz, and for the next week operations were flown at a reduced pace.

When the tempo picked up again on 26 June most units were active. No 3 RAAF Sqn's acting CO, 11-kill ace Sqn Ldr 'Nicky' Barr, suffered engine problems and was then set upon by two Bf 109s during a bomber escort on this day. Having been badly wounded, the Australian bailed out and was captured, a fate that also befell No 4 SAAF's CO, John Hewitson.

That evening the South African squadrons were active once more, scrambled against an incoming Ju 87 raid. Capt Dennis Lacey of No 5 Sqn SAAF downed a Ju 87 for his fifth victory and damaged two others.

BATTLES OVER EL ALAMEIN

The British and Commonwealth forces fell back on the prepared positions around the tiny junction at El Alamein, where they prepared for Rommel's offensive to take Egypt. It began on 1 July, and all squadrons were fully committed.

Among the future Kittyhawk aces to score at this time was 'Eddie' Edwards of No 260 Sqn, who shot down a Bf 109F on the 6th while flying ET623/HS-E. No 112 Sqn's CO Billy Drake claimed his second with the Kittyhawk (in ET790/GA-?) two days later. That same day three aces with No 250 Sqn also scored, CO Sqn Ldr Mike Judd and Flt Lt Alfred Marshall (flying ET916/LD-A) each downed a Stuka, and wing leader Wg Cdr Howard Mayers, who was flying with the unit (in ET836/LD-U), destroyed a Bf 109. This flight formed the final entry in his log book – 'Leading 4 Sqn's over LG21. Got ME 109F confirmed' – for on 20 July he became a PoW shortly after downing a C.202.

At the time of his loss, Mayers' No 239 Wing consisted of Nos 112, 250, 450 and 3 RAAF Sqns, while No 233 had Nos 260, 2 SAAF, 4 SAAF and 5 SAAF Sqns, with the latter still flying Tomahawks. All were increasingly



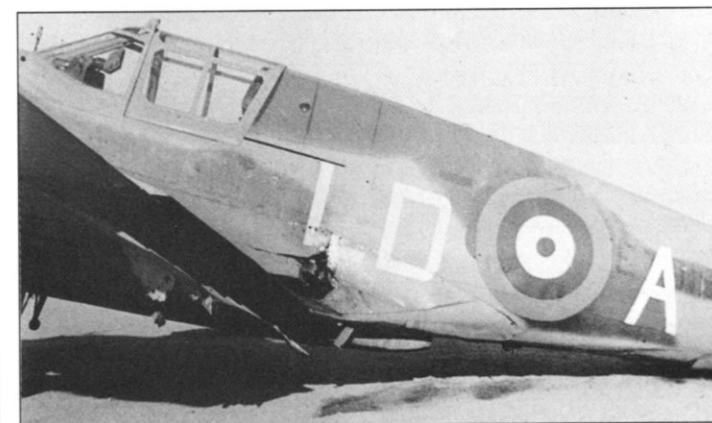
Kittyhawk I AK670/HS-P of No 260 Sqn is seen in mid 1942. Although the serial is not recorded in his logbook, 'Eddie' Edwards was flying 'HS-P' when, on 26 June, he probably destroyed a Bf 109F south of Mersah Matruh. It is therefore quite likely that it was this aircraft that he used to claim the probable (Author's collection)

With 13 and two shared victories gained whilst flying Kittyhawks, Sqn Ldr Billy Drake of No 112 Sqn was the leading RAF exponent on the type, gaining all of his kills in the second half of 1942 (No 128 Sqn records)



Sqn Ldr Billy Drake claimed his second kill with the Kittyhawk when he brought down a Bf 109F near the enemy airfield of El Daba on 8 July 1942 whilst flying this Mk IA (ET790/GA-7). As the photograph clearly shows, No 112 Sqn was flying fighter-bomber missions, with bombs carried under the fuselage, at the time of Drake's success (Author's collection)

The heavy damage inflicted to Kittyhawk IA ET916/LD-A of No 250 Sqn reveals the inherent robustness of the Curtiss family of fighters. It was the regular mount of Flt Lt Alfred Marshall, who included 3.5 victories in the Kittyhawk within his total of 16 and two shared destroyed. He used this machine to down a Bf 109 on 5 July (D Cormack)



Kittyhawk III FR300/OK-M of No 450 Sqn is being bombed up at LG 91 during preparations for the forthcoming offensive at El Alamein. It joined the squadron in early October, and was regularly flown by the CO, Sqn Ldr 'Willy' Williams, before his loss (A W J Taylor)



Despite little activity on the ground, much activity took place in the skies above, with units of both wings being heavily involved. No 5's jinx continued, however, and on 7 August it lost another CO.

Maj Dennis Lacey, who had five victories, had not long taken over when he led his squadron on top cover for 'Kittybombers' south-west of El Alamein. Over the target they met heavy ground fire and his aircraft was badly hit. Lacey turned for home, and what happened next was described by one of his wingmen, Capt R F Armstrong:

'Dennis must have been wounded for he turned for home and told the remaining two pilots in his flight to

go down with him. Dudley Dove was flying No 3 and 2Lt Jack No 4. They flew on either side of Dennis. When about 20 miles from our landing ground, and just as they began to relax, they were jumped by two Me 109s. Dennis went straight in and blew up. Dudley's aircraft was badly hit, but Jack turned and got in a short burst head on at the Hun No 1, who blew up in mid air.'

The Bf 109s were from III./JG 53 and Lacey probably fell victim to Gefreiter Herman Dorman, who was then also shot down. Lacey was the fourth commander of No 5 Sqn to have fallen in action since the start of the enemy offensive.

Rommel's final push against the Alamein line began on 31 August, and led to a period of further heavy fighting and substantial losses for the Desert Air Force. The first day of September saw extensive air attacks on the enemy, but at considerable cost, with Marseille having a field day. Allied aces also scored, including Bobby Gibbes of No 3 Sqn RAAF, who downed a Bf 109 to register his first kill since he was injured in May. Billy Drake of No 112 Sqn shot down two Ju 87s and 'Danny' Saville got one, taking his overall tally to six victories.

However, No 5 Sqn SAAF lost four Tomahawks on the 31st, whilst No 4 Sqn SAAF lost its CO in an accident. 'Rosie' du Toit was promoted to command the unit, and on the 7 September (flying ET901/KJ-O) he destroyed a Bf 109, although his Kittyhawk was damaged.

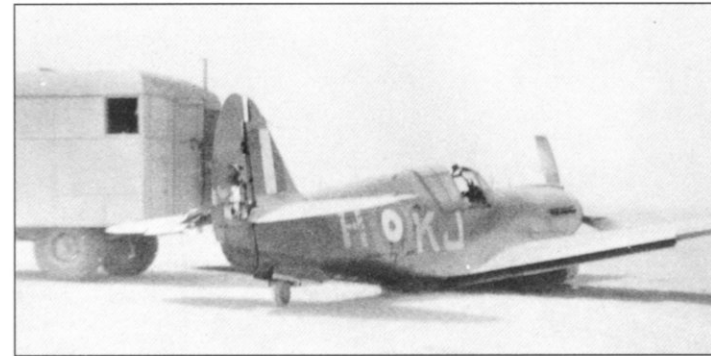
The enemy had suffered heavy losses in their initial push, especially against the defences around Alam Halfa, and a British counter-attack on the 3rd forced them back – the Axis withdrawal was completed on the 5th. The Kittyhawk units' losses were heavy, as 'Eddie' Edwards recalled;

'Many new pilots had arrived on the squadron and intensive training took place. The squadron seemed to take on a new lease of life and knit together as a fighting team. By mid September 1942 I was leading the squadron on occasions as a sergeant.'

The Desert Air Force Kittyhawk squadrons were truly Commonwealth affairs. For example, Edwards, a Canadian, was flying with an RAF unit,



Kittyhawk alumni at Gasr el Arid in June 1942. Those pilots visible to the camera are, from left to right, Wg Cdr Barney Beresford (wing leader), Sqn Ldr Billy Drake (CO of No 112 Sqn), Flt Lt 'Willy' Williams (flight commander No 450 Sqn) and Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury (CO No 260 Sqn) (J F Edwards)

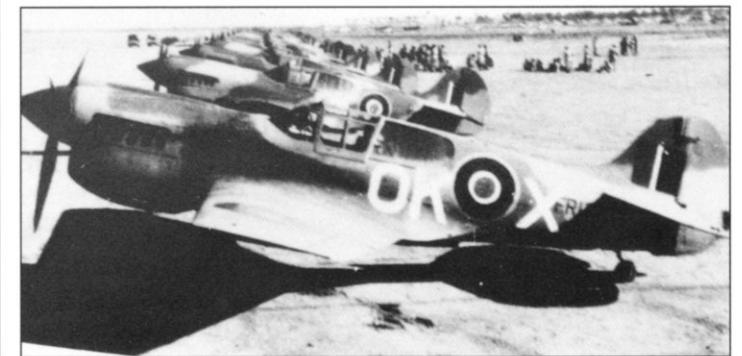


Kittyhawk III ET512/KJ-H of No 4 Sqn SAAF is seen where it came to rest after being crash-landed with combat damage by Lt T A Milne at LG 97 on 8 August 1942. On 21 July Flt Off John Waddy had used this fighter to make his first claim of his tour with No 4 Sqn when he probably destroyed a Bf 109 while escorting Boston bombers (Author's collection)

Flt Lt Maurice Barber of No 250 Sqn poses for the camera soon after claiming three Ju 87s over El Taqa on 1 October 1942. Weeks later the South African was promoted to command No 450 Sqn. There remains some doubt as to the precise number of Barber's victories, whether three or five (D Cormack)



Kittyhawk III FR125/OK-X heads a line up of No 450 Sqn fighters at Castel Benito in January 1943. It was usually flown by unit CO Sqn Ldr Maurice Barber, who led the squadron from November 1942 through to March 1943. He made a total of five air combat claims, three destroyed, one probable and one damaged, although it has also been reported that he had five victories. All of these claims were made in Kittyhawks (J W Bennett)



while on 15 August Capt 'Danny' Saville, a South African, had joined No 112 Sqn as a flight commander and was later to command No 260. Flt Lt John Waddy, an Australian ace, had joined No 4 Sqn SAAF at around the same time.

On 20 September Waddy was flying Kittyhawk EV321/KJ-G on a patrol of Burg el Arab when they were vectored to intercept an intruder. He later recounted;

'Approaching Alamein, bomb bursts were sighted dead ahead. We were at 13,000 ft and went into a shallow dive and sighted enemy aircraft at about 5000 ft. The leading section attacked and I observed three ME 109s do a right-hand climbing turn. I immediately pulled out of the dive and made an almost full beam attack and saw strikes on the engine and cockpit. It then pulled straight up and I followed, making a rear quarter attack after which it stalled and went into a vertical dive, going in.'

This Bf 109 took Waddy's tally to 12, (this victory being his last with the Curtiss fighter) and his only confirmed score with the South African unit.

As the build-up to Gen Bernard Montgomery's offensive at El Alamein progressed, so the Desert Air Force Kittyhawk squadrons kept hammering

away at the enemy. Their pilots also continued to make significant claims. For example, on 1 October elements of Nos 112 and 250 Sqs intercepted a large formation of Ju 87s raiding El Taqa, and a number were shot down. The main honours went to Flt Lt Maurice Barber of No 250 Sqn, who claimed three.

The preparation of the battlefields continued, including concentrated attacks on the enemy airstrips around El Daba. On 22 October 'Eddie' Edwards, now a flight sergeant, was flying in this area in one of the first Kittyhawk IIs

(FL233) to reach the frontline when he shot down a Bf 109F for his fifth victory – 24 hours earlier he had destroyed a C.202. Edwards later described the milestone action;

'We saw two Me 109s climb then level off. It was evident that they hadn't seen my four Kittyhawks flying as top cover. I waited until the two Messerschmitts were about to pass under my nose some 2000 ft below before starting down with a quick wingover. The Me 109s began banking left. At about 150 yards I pressed the trigger then pulled back hard on the stick in a climbing turn to starboard. I could see my victim, hit in the engine and along the port wing root and fuselage, heading straight towards earth, trailing fire and smoke.'

The following evening the bombardment began, starting the Battle of El Alamein. The infantry fixed bayonets.

As part of the Allied air support put up for this operation, and tasked with preventing the enemy from concentrating its forces, the Kittyhawk squadrons flew flat out, hitting encampments and defences. Axis fighters fought back, and there were numerous combats. One on the 26th involved Capt Jack Parsonson of No 2 Sqn SAAF. He was flying EV326/DB-F as top cover for a Boston raid when about ten enemy fighters broke through to the bombers. He explained;

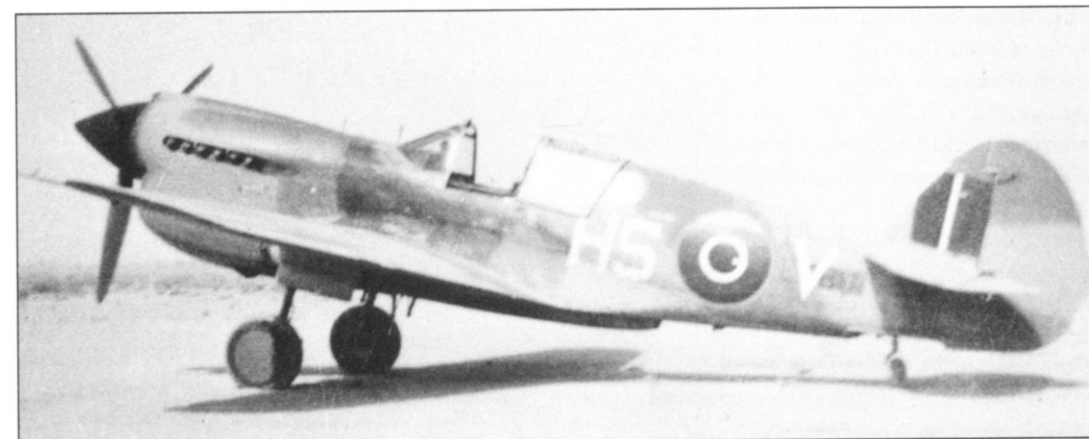
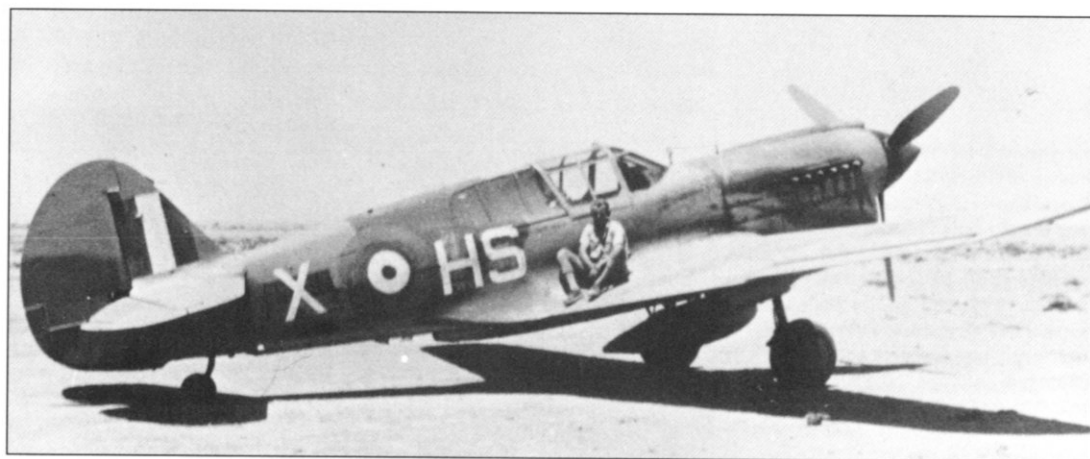
'One Me 109F pulled up after his attack and came across my front. I pulled up and fired a full deflection shot and hit him. He winged over into a near vertical dive, streaming white and black smoke. I followed and eventually broke off.'

Although Parsonson had flown the Mohawk in action over East Africa, this Bf 109F gave Parsonson the first of his 4.5 victories.



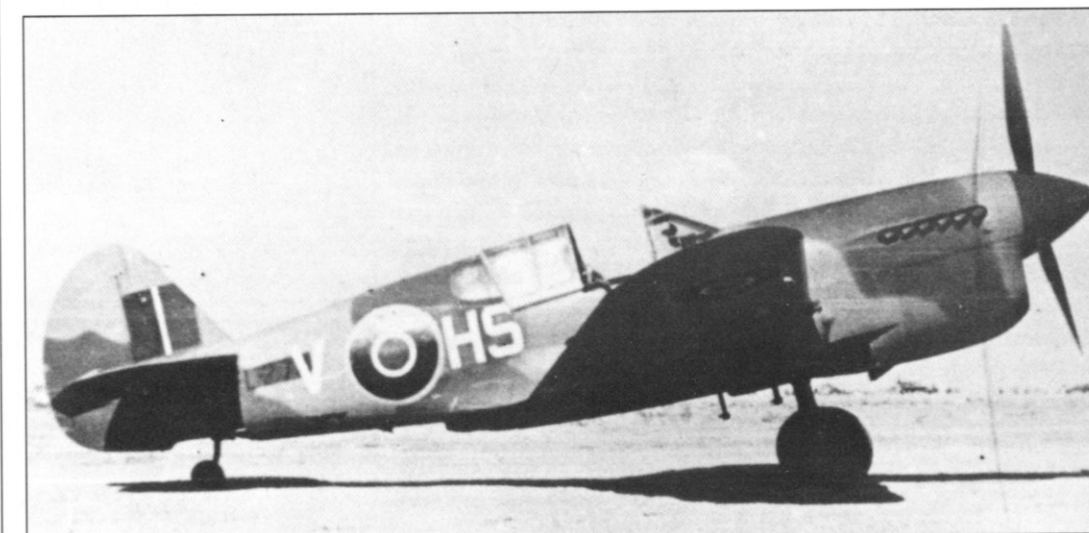
This very expressive nose art was carried on most of the Kittyhawks assigned to the irrepressible Bobby Gibbes of No 3 Sqn RAAF, who rose from pilot officer to command the unit, and completed his tour (having flown 274 sorties) in North Africa as an ace with ten and two shared victories (*R H M Gibbes*)

Sgt Ron Cundy of No 260 Sqn sits at readiness in Kittyhawk I HS-X (probably ET788) at Gasr el Arid in May 1942. On 4 August he shot down his first enemy aircraft, setting him on the road to a score of five and two shared victories (*J F Edwards*)



This photograph is believed to show Kittyhawk I ET861/HS-V of No 260 Sqn. It too was flown by RAAF ace Ron Cundy (by now a pilot officer), who used it to claim his first victory – a Bf 109F south-west of El Alamein – on 4 August 1942. He eventually became an ace and later flew Spitfires with the RAAF in defence of Northern Australia (*S M Coates*)

Kittyhawk IIA FL229/HS-V of No 260 Sqn was being flown by Ron Cundy (now a flight lieutenant) on 31 October when he downed a Bf 109 and shared in the destruction of another. He became an ace on 4 November when he destroyed a Ju 88 (*via R Brown*)



Two days later, Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes, appropriately, claimed No 3 Sqn's 200th victory (and his tenth) when he shot down a Bf 109F near El Daba. Gibbes, who was flying Kittyhawk III FR305/CV-V, described what happened;

'I saw three Me 109s flying in line astern. They were about 100 yards apart and I decided to aim at the middle one, so let go about 50 rounds. Immediately, the third one in line belched smoke and went into an uncontrollable spin. I was amazed as I hadn't aimed at it. Later that night we had a terrific party to celebrate our 200th kill, and I confessed that I had aimed for the Me 109 about 100 yards away from the one I downed!'

Another Australian who claimed that day was Flt Lt Ron Cundy of No 260 Sqn, who also downed a Bf 109 for his second kill. On 4 November this unit welcomed back 'Pedro' Hanbury for another tour in command. That same day Rommel ordered a general withdrawal, allowing Commonwealth forces to break out of their Alamein position.

It was also on this day of heavy action that Ron Cundy was credited with his fifth kill, as 'Eddie' Edwards described in his autobiography;

'Cundy spotted a Ju 88 flying low in a westerly direction and out to sea. He dived on it and his section followed. Within minutes he watched it

career towards the sea. Cundy's shot had hit the Ju 88 in a vital spot. Sprays of water leapt high into the air as it crashed.'

Cundy should have 'made ace' the previous day, as he recorded in his logbook 'Had a squirt at an Me 110 but did not get it'. In fact, Luftwaffe records show that a III./ZG 26 aircraft was forced down and the crew killed, and there was no other claim for the type that day.

RACE ACROSS THE DESERT

A general advance began, although bad weather hampered the Allies, as did a spirited enemy rearguard action. Desert Air Force units began to move forward in support, and they continued to encounter Axis fighters.

No 2 Sqn SAAF, covering No 260 Sqn on a sweep to Tobruk on the 10th, enjoyed mixed results. Charles Laubscher, having transferred to the SAAF, claimed his fifth victory during the mission. Flying ET977 some 30 miles west of Sollum, his section came across a formation of Bf 109s, and having dived after one he sighted a second. He later stated;

'He pulled up in front of me but I caught him in the climb and had a deflection shot at him as he turned left. He half rolled into a dive and I followed him, firing about three more short bursts. When I thought he couldn't pull out I pulled up and saw him hit the ground.'

His victim was Leutnant Konrad Fels of I./JG 77. Jack Parsonson, meanwhile, did not immediately return from this engagement. His subsequent combat report explained why;

'South of Sollum we were attacked by ME 109s and No 260 Sqn were engaged, and so Red and then Yellow sections of my squadron dived down to engage followed by two aircraft from my section, leaving me and No 2 on top. Four ME 109s were in the air near us, two of which attacked. I got separated from my No 2 and then from the whole formation. While I was by myself I was attacked by a total of eight ME 109s. The fight took place from 14,000 ft down to nought feet, and lasted for perhaps 20-30 minutes. A shell pierced my oil tank, both mainplanes were hit and my radio was shot away.

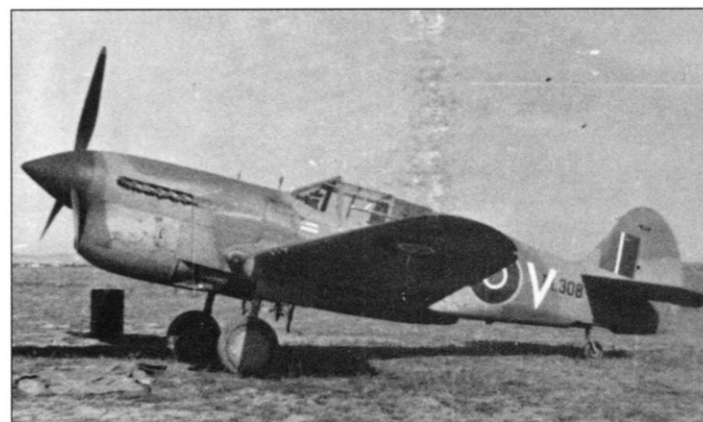
'I force-landed and hid behind my propeller boss while an ME 109 came down and set my aircraft of fire. Then I ran to a circle of stones, which was strafed. The ME 109s circled until a German infantry party came up and took me prisoner.'

Parsonson managed to escape four days later and was picked up by a British patrol on 15 November.

On the 16th the squadrons of No 233 Wing claimed another clutch of victories (mainly Ju 87s) during the course of two missions. No 112 Sqn was also active, with Flt Lt Robert Smith sharing a Bf 109 to take his score to 5.5 kills.

The 8th Army's advance soon reached Tobruk, and the units moved forward to Gazala on the 17th. That day enemy attempts to evacuate Benghazi by air led to significant losses. In the first action of the day, by No 250 Sqn, a Ju 52/3m and six He 111s were downed over the airfield. One was shared by future Canadian ace Flt Lt Gordie Troke, his fourth claim – his fifth came two days later when he shared a Ju 88 over Magrun.

The enemy's heavy transport losses continued on the 18th. During the late morning Capt Vernon Lindsay and two other pilots from No 2 Sqn SAAF, along with two from No 4 Sqn SAAF, flew an interception



Boasting a squadron leader's pennant below its cockpit, Kittyhawk IIA FL308/CV-V was the regular mount of Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes in early 1943. He usually flew aircraft coded with the individual letter 'V', and this particular machine was his last assigned Kittyhawk prior to him handing over command of No 3 Sqn RAAF to Sqn Ldr B A Eaton on 19 April (R H M Gibbes)

then made a full deflection attack on another Ju 52, and it too burst into flames and hit the deck. Golding and I then strafed another Ju 52 which had been forced down, and it too burst into flames.'

Lindsay, who was in Kittyhawk EV162/DB-X, was credited with 2.5 Ju 52/3ms destroyed to take his total to four and two shared, thus making him No 2's latest ace. Five more transports were claimed by other pilots.

The ascendancy of Allied air power increased in December, and on the afternoon of the 13th Sqn Ldr Billy Drake of No 112 shared in the destruction of a Bf 109 in a fierce fight south of El Agheila. This would be his 15th, and last, victory claim in the Kittyhawk, although he led the squadron for another month.

Bobby Gibbes, his opposite number in No 3 Sqn RAAF, also remained busy, very much leading from the front. On 21 December, following a successful strafing attack on the airstrip at Hun, Flg Off Rex Bailey crash-landed well behind enemy lines. Gibbes landed on the uneven, rocky desert floor and picked him up, in spite of his port undercarriage being damaged. For this selfless act he was awarded a well deserved DSO.

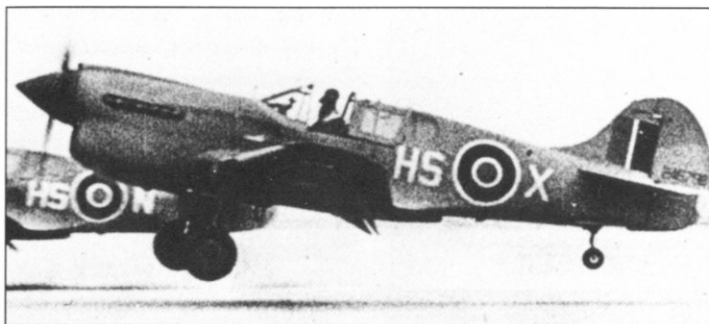
The following day 'Eddie' Edwards became a flight commander in No 260, having gone from flight sergeant to flight lieutenant in under a month! He celebrated in fine style on the 30th by leading for the first time as an officer (in FR350) on his 126th operational sortie. Nearing the battle area, he and his men spotted six Bf 109Gs in the dive. Ordering some of his pilots to deal with the top cover, he went in pursuit of the diving *Gustavs*;

'At about 100 yards from the target I opened fire with a deflection shot. The Me 109 flipped on its back, the pilot bailed out and the aircraft burst into flames. Turning on the next one, I fired from approximately 150 yards at 30 degrees off astern and saw the bullets tear through wing and fuselage. The No 2, Sgt Brown, finished it off.'

These were among the last claims for 1942 – a year of bitter fighting in which the Tomahawk and Kittyhawk squadrons had played a very full part in spite of suffering heavy losses.

BATTLE OF MARETH

With the 8th Army approaching Tripoli in early 1943, Axis forces retreated back into southern Tunisia, where they intended to make a stand centred around the old French fortifications at Mareth.



No 260 Sqn CO Sqn Ldr 'Pedro' Hanbury flew Kittyhawk III HS-X in January 1943, the fighter still featuring its USAAF serial (245798) on its rudder at the time this photograph was taken. It may have later been re-serialised FR829. It seems likely that this was the machine Hanbury used to shoot down a Bf 109 over Churgia on 2 January 1943 (*Author's collection*)



Meanwhile, Anglo-American forces were advancing eastwards after landing in Algeria. Most Desert Air Force Kittyhawk units now flew the improved Mk IIIs and concentrated on fighter-bomber duties, while No 5 Sqn SAAF at last disposed of its war-weary Tomahawks in January. No 239 Wing contained the RAF units, with No 7 Wing SAAF (formerly No 233 Wing) controlling the three SAAF squadrons.

No 260 Sqn carried on into 1943 where it had left off, and during a sweep over Churgia LG on 2 January, 'Pedro' Hanbury shot down his first aircraft since his return when the Bf 109 he attacked blew up and crashed. Edwards also destroyed a Messerschmitt fighter, this aircraft possibly being from 4./JG 77.

Sweeps and attacks on enemy concentrations continued on a daily basis, although most of the pure fighter work was being increasingly done by the ever-growing number of Spitfire V units in-theatre. Wg Cdr Billy Burton, leader of No 239 Wing, led No 3 Sqn RAAF on 18 January when it escorted Nos 250 and 260 Sqn to Tarhuna. Approaching the target area, 20+ Bf 109s were reported, six of which duly went after the Australian fighters that were providing top cover.

Kittyhawk IIA FL341/CV-E of No 3 Sqn RAAF taxis out at the start of yet another fighter-bomber mission with a 500-lb 'cookie' slung beneath its fuselage. Having seen service with No 260 Sqn, this war-weary machine was flown only occasionally by No 3 Sqn. On 28 December 1942 it was used by Wg Cdr 'Billy' Burton, the No 239 Wing Leader (*RAAF Museum*)



Flt Lt Gordie Troke of the RCAF leans against his No 250 Sqn Kittyhawk III FR120/LD-E which he flew for much of the Tunisian campaign, mainly on ground-attack missions. At its controls, the Canadian claimed two strafing kills, namely a Ju 52/3m on 16 January and a Ju 88 five days later. His final claim on the Kittyhawk was also in FR120 when, on 26 February, he probably destroyed a Bf 109G during the opening stages of the Battle of the Mareth Line (*S M Fochuk*)

his final claim over North Africa on his second last operational flight in-theatre. Having dropped his 500-lb bomb on target over the Mareth area, he got entangled in what he described as 'a vicious dogfight with an Me 109 which lasted 20 minutes before it made off into cloud heavily damaged'.

Troke was flying his regular Kittyhawk III FR120/LD-E, which he had used exclusively since 8 December. Performing some highly effective ground attacks in this aircraft, he had destroyed a Ju 52/3m on the ground on 16 January and a Ju 88 at Castel Benito airfield five days later. Troke left the desert with three and two shared kills to his credit, adding another two and one shared destroyed with No 443 Sqn over Holland the following year whilst flying Spitfire IXs.

The build-up to the assault on the formidable Mareth Line fully occupied the Kittyhawk units over the coming weeks. Opposition was bitter, and among the losses was Flt Lt Robert Smith, one of six pilots from No 112 Sqn who fell to JG 77's Bf 109s on 10 March. He succumbed to *Geschwaderkommodore* and 135-kill *experte* Maj Joachim Müncheberg to become a PoW. Thirteen days later Smith's victor was himself killed in action on his 500th mission when he collided with a USAAF fighter that he had shot up just seconds earlier.

A flanking attack on the Mareth Line was launched by a division of New Zealand troops on the night of 20 March. The enemy countered the following day, but heavy rain later reduced air activity. Kittyhawks resumed attacks on positions around El Hamma on the 22nd, and these continued until the 25th. Allied commanders quickly realised that the 88 mm flak guns that had been dug in to play an anti-tank role would prove deadly against advancing armour, so on the 26th it was decided to make the first major use of fighter-bombers in a land battle.

Waves of Kittyhawks from Nos 7 SAAF and 239 Wings, along with USAAF fighter groups, devastated enemy anti-tank and gun positions, allowing a ground advance that would eventually push the enemy back towards Tunis. It marked the start of the final chapter for the Axis forces in Africa.

SLAUGHTER OF THE TRANSPORTS

In spite of their defeat at Mareth, Axis forces still tried to reinforce their increasingly hopeless position in Africa. With the sea routes across the Mediterranean controlled by the Allies, the Germans attempted to create a massive air bridge with transport aircraft crammed full of men and equipment. On 5 April the Allies launched Operation *Flax* in an attempt to disrupt this resupply effort.

The main aerial successes of this brief campaign fell to USAAF and Spitfire units, while the Desert Air Force's Kittyhawk wings continued to support the push on Tunis. On 19 April – the day after the now famous 'Palm Sunday Massacre' by USAAF P-40s – Luftwaffe and *Regia Aeronautica* transports took another fearful beating, this time at the hands of No 7 SAAF Wing.

Over the next few days the wing was to produce the last Commonwealth Kittyhawk aces in the Mediterranean theatre. During a dawn patrol, which commenced at 0530 hrs, Lt Col Doug Loftus and his men claimed 15 aircraft destroyed. Capt 'Hoefie' Hauptfleisch, a pilot with No 2 Sqn SAAF, recalls the events;

'Doug Loftus was leading No 5 Sqn. I was leading No 2 as medium cover and Douglas Golding (who had eight victories and three shared - author) No 4 as top cover when a mixed gaggle of about 20 Ju 52s and SM.79s (they were in fact SM.82s - author) were seen flying on the deck towards Tunis. They were escorted by six fighters. While Douglas and his boys took care of the fighters, Doug and I led our squadrons into the attack and 16 enemy aircraft were shot down, one of them an Italian Re 2001 fighter.

'A large number of the transport aircraft were undoubtedly carrying a full load of petrol for they caught alight from nose to tail and disintegrated as our pilots opened fire. I got one which didn't burn initially, but on diving into the ground it erupted in a huge ball of flame.'

Loftus shot down two of the transports, taking his final score to 4.5 destroyed – he also received an immediate DSO. No 5 Sqn's CO, Maj Jack Parsonson, also shot down a Ju 52, his third claim. Actual losses were slightly less than thought, but it was nonetheless another severe blow to the enemy.

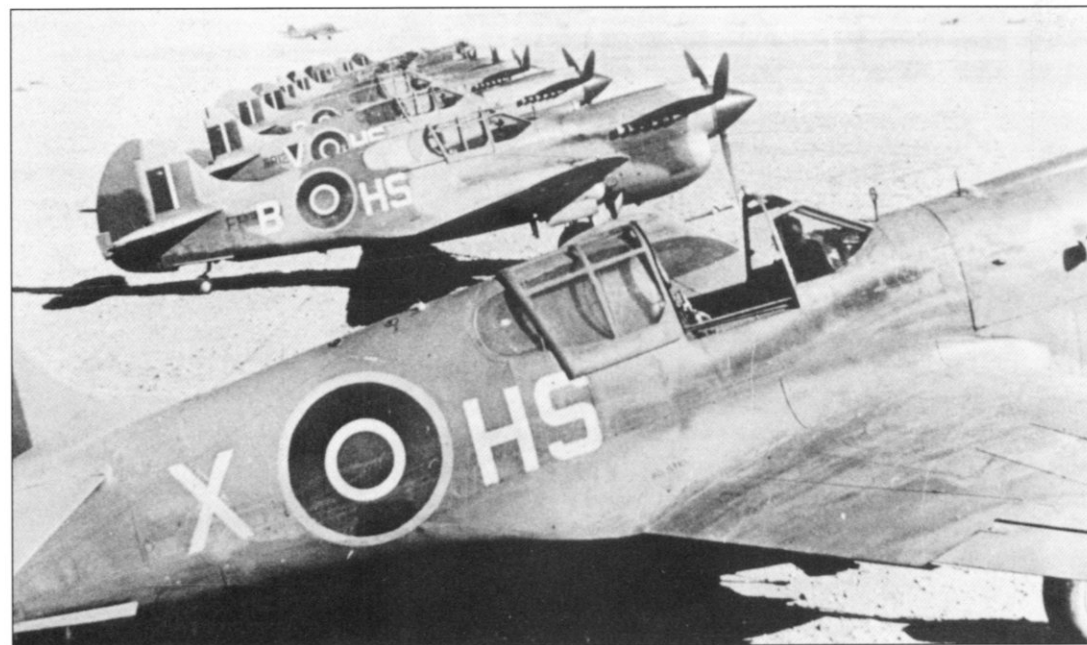
The slaughter was repeated three days later, again by No 7 SAAF Wing, this time led by Maj Parsonson with No 2 Sqn SAAF as top cover during a sweep over the Gulf of Tunis. They were given unexpected support by 18 Spitfires, who thought the SAAF aircraft were 'their' USAAF P-40 charges!

Leaving their bases in the early morning, the South African pilots spotted a large formation of huge six-engined Me 323s in one 'Vic' of 15 and another of five, along with their escorting fighters. The latter were tackled by the Spitfires, and with No 2 Sqn staying aloft, Nos 4 and 5 Sqn made a head-on attack on the transports. They claimed the complete destruction of the formation, as described by one of the pilots involved in the action, Capt Du Toit;

'On 22 April Jack was leading No 7 Wing when there was horrific carnage as 24 huge six-engined Me 323 transport aircraft were destroyed. Jack and his pilots sailed into the hapless enemy aircraft which were



Lt Col Doug Loftus was one of a number of SAAF pilots to become wing leaders in the desert. After flying with No 2 Sqn SAAF, he led No 7 SAAF Wing in the successful interception of enemy transports on 19 April 1943, when he personally shot down two Ju 52/3ms to become an ace (via C F Shores)



Beyond No 260 Sqn's Kittyhawk III HS-X at Castel Benito, in Libya, in January 1943 is FR358/HS-B. It was the aircraft of one of the great aces of the Desert Air Force, Flt Lt 'Eddie' Edwards, although by this time No 260 Sqn was mainly flying fighter-bomber missions. The nearest aircraft was assigned to unit CO, 'Pedro' Hanbury, although it does not wear an RAF serial in the usual place (J F Edwards)

undoubtedly carrying a full cargo of fuel. They burst into flames on impact with the water, the burning petrol spreading out in all directions, giving the impression that the sea was alight.'

Parsonson destroyed two to become an ace, an honour shared by Maj 'Johnny' Human who destroyed one to claim his fifth kill. They were the last Commonwealth pilots to become aces on the Tomahawk/Kittyhawk series in the Mediterranean, although Parsonson's luck deserted him on 30 April when he was shot down for the third time. On this occasion he ended up as a PoW.

Just as the carnage was coming to an end, the Kittyhawks of Nos 250 and 260 Sqn appeared and got involved, 'Eddie' Edwards and two others destroying what was probably the final Me 323 still left aloft. It would also prove to be the Canadian ace's last claim in a Kittyhawk, his score then standing at 12 and three shared victories.

The enemy forces in Africa surrendered on 13 May. Gradually, a number of the Desert Air Force Kittyhawk squadrons were re-equipped with Spitfires or Mustangs. Those that remained flew with distinction in the campaigns in Sicily and Italy, although almost exclusively in the fighter-bomber role.

The last air combat victories for the Kittyhawk in this theatre came on 7 April 1944 when 12 aircraft from No 112 Sqn caught about a dozen Fw 190s as they lifted off from Reiti. Diving into heavy anti-aircraft fire they shot down three and damaged three more for the loss of two aircraft and pilots.

The Tomahawk and Kittyhawk had been the workhorses of the Desert Air Force through much of the lengthy campaign in North Africa. Although not blessed with the best performance, they were well armed, generally reliable and rugged – all qualities which earned the respect and affection of the pilots who flew them, including some of the leading Allied aces of World War 2.

NEW GUINEA

While many Australians were flying Tomahawks and Kittyhawks in the desert, closer to home unbridled Japanese aggression, and rapid advances in South-east Asia, posed a serious threat to Australia itself, and one it was ill-prepared to meet. It was critical that the RAAF's fighter force was rapidly expanded both at home and on the strategically important island of New Guinea to the north.

By early 1942 the USAAF had sent detachments of P-40s for the defence of northern Australia, while on 8 March the first batch of P-40E Kittyhawk Is were transferred to the RAAF. Others intended for the RAF under Lend-Lease were soon diverted to the region as well.

The Kittyhawk was duly given the RAAF type number A29, and the first batch were numbered A29-1 to A29-25. These first aircraft were immediately issued to No 75 Sqn at Townsville, in Queensland, where the unit had formed on 4 March. Ten days later a second unit, No 76 Sqn, formed at Archerfield, again, in Queensland, followed on 16 March by No 77 Sqn at Pearce, in Western Australia.

No 75 Sqn's personnel came from a variety of units, but included a hard core of pilots who had gained their combat experience from fighting in North Africa. Given the task of working up the unit in double quick time was its CO, Wg Cdr Peter Jeffrey, who had claimed 5.5 destroyed in the desert the previous year. Among his experienced pilots were aces Flt Lts John Jackson with six victories and Peter Turnbull with nine.

Among the newcomers were some who would make their mark, such as Jackson's younger brother Les, Flt Lt John Piper and Flg Offs Geoff Atherton and Barry Cox. Although destined for great things, the newer pilots were initially a worry to the more experienced men in the unit, for most had but a handful of flying hours (usually 12) on the Kittyhawk. Ill-prepared or not, the Japanese threat to the town of Port Moresby on the southern coast of New Guinea was very real. It had first been raided on 3 February, and on 17 March No 75 Sqn began moving there to defend it.

In the weeks to come the unit was to write one of the most gallant episodes in the history of the RAAF. On the 19th, John Jackson, nicknamed 'Old John' at 34, was made CO. He was to prove an inspiration.

DEFENCE OF MORESBY

At Moresby there were minimal facilities awaiting the unit, with the strip at Seven Mile not yet being fully operational and the area boasting only the most primitive early warning system for detecting incoming raiders.

The first four Kittyhawks (nicknamed by the sceptical Moresby garrison as 'Neverhawks' or 'Tomorrowhawks') arrived over the port in the early afternoon of 21 March, only to be fired at when on finals by trigger-happy Allied troops. All four fighters were hit, and Jeffrey had a narrow escape when a bullet passed between the fighter's headrest and his head, missing him by half an inch!

However, just two hours later two hastily patched up Kittyhawks took off on No 75 Sqn's first scramble. Flg Offs Barry Cox and Wilbur Wackett



Sqn Ldr J F 'Old John' Jackson DFC became an ace in the Middle East flying Hurricane Is and Tomahawk IIBs with No 3 Sqn RAAF. Returning to Australia in October 1941, having completed his tour in North Africa, he was given command of No 75 Sqn just 15 days after its formation on 4 March 1942. Later that same month Jackson led the unit in the epic defence of Port Moresby. His final aerial success came on 28 April when he destroyed a Zero, but the Australian was in turn shot down and killed just moments later (No 75 Sqn records)

Seen at the extreme left, the new CO of No 75 Sqn, Sqn Ldr Les Jackson (younger brother of 'Old John' Jackson), enjoys a well-earned cigarette after a sortie. During a hectic few months he destroyed five Zeros. The other two pilots, who also enjoyed success during the 44-day defence of Port Moresby, are Flt Lts John Piper (3.5 kills) and Pete Masters (1.5 kills) (No 75 Sqn Records)



intercepted the regular Japanese reconnaissance flight and, closing from astern, each pilot fired several bursts. With Cox aiming at the port engine and Wackett in turn at the starboard, the bomber (believed to have been a Ki-21 'Sally') exploded. The troops on the ground were euphoric.

Soon, the rest of the squadron arrived, and some spotted the wreckage of the Japanese aircraft in the water at the entrance to the harbour.

The enemy were still not aware of No 75 Sqn's presence, so Jackson decided to mount a surprise raid on the main Japanese airfield at Lae, on New Guinea's north coast. This base was home to the Imperial Japanese Navy's elite *Tainan Kokutai*, this highly experienced unit boasting some of the leading Japanese aces of the war, including WO Hiroyoshi Nishizawa (86 kills), Ens Saburo Sakai (64 kills), Lt Junichi Sasai (54 kills) and PO1/c Toshio Ota (34 kills).

At 0630 hrs on 22 March, Jackson led nine Kittyhawks across the forbidding Owen Stanley mountain range. One of them was flown by Flt Lt John Piper, who remembers 'At about 14,000 ft up we went over the range, threading our way through these glorious silver mountains as the sun started to rise'. Jackson split his formation into two groups, leading five himself as strafers, while the remainder, led by Peter Turnbull, provided top cover. The Japanese were taken completely by surprise, with fighters and bombers being hit before the Kittyhawks sped out to sea. Piper flew so low that the underside of his wing was gouged by the propeller of a parked fighter!

The enemy's standing fighter patrol soon arrived over Lae, and it was engaged by Turnbull's section. Flying A29-12, Turnbull dropped his

belly tank and dived on one of the Zeros, which he hit in the tail and it went down for his tenth victory. Another fell to Flg Off Pettitt.

Two RAAF fighters were lost, however, one Kittyhawk being hit by flak over Lae and the other falling to the Zeros, although its pilot, Flg Off Wackett, eventually returned a month later after a harrowing time avoiding capture.

The following day the Japanese repaid the compliment, destroying two Kittyhawks (A29-10 and A29-25) at Seven Mile strip. With the situation deteriorating Jackson was given permission to withdraw his men to the security of Horn Island, but he bravely chose to stay at Moresby.

On 24 March No 75 Sqn encountered the enemy in the air again when John Piper sighted a G4M 'Betty' bomber flying a reconnaissance mission some 5000 ft above him. Stalking it, he fired as

the aircraft turned, causing him to miss. However, his second burst started a fire in the port wing and after another burst, the G4M rolled onto its back and fell out of control into the sea. Although he was not to achieve acesdom, Piper enjoyed great success over Moresby, claiming 3.5 destroyed and three damaged.

Later that morning two Kittyhawk pilots attempted an interception of a formation of 18 aircraft. Flt Lt Les Jackson, flying A29-7/A, made a head-on attack on a section of three escorting A6M Zeros, hitting one which crashed into the forest. This gave him his first victory.

On the 27th Piper shared in the destruction of another bomber, but one of the intercepting Kittyhawk pilots was lost. Further raids were intercepted over subsequent days, with several possible claims.

During one patrol at 20,000 ft, Les Jackson spotted three Zeros attacking an inbound B-17. As he dived to help the bomber, his canopy misted over completely, leaving him blind within about 100 yards of an enemy fighter, which he almost collided with! Opening his canopy, Jackson found a fighter on his tail, and he was lucky to shake it off. By now No 75 Sqn had lost 11 of its original aircraft, plus several pilots – it was down to just ten serviceable Kittyhawks, in spite of some replacements arriving.

Scrambles occurred daily, and at the beginning of April No 75 Sqn also began escorting USAAF A-24 (Dauntless) dive-bombers during attacks on Lae. The CO led another strafing attack there on the afternoon of the 4th, setting a bomber on fire, while his younger brother did the same to a Zero. One of the pilots later recalled that 'John Jackson had done his survey (alone!) that morning, and then briefed the plan of attack'.

The following morning Sqn Ldr Jackson led seven aircraft to intercept an escorted formation of bombers. The enemy were spotted at 21,000 ft, and the Kittyhawks swept in to attack. Les Jackson, flying A29-9/N, carried out a head-on attack on the bombers, but was dived on by one of the escorting Zeros. As it passed he dived after it, firing a very long burst which hit the Zero and caused it to burst into flames – he claimed his second victim. Pulling up into a zoom climb, Jackson turned towards another fighter, which only escaped by diving into cloud. Other pilots also had brushes with the fighters, and after landing they were credited with the bomber and two Zeros damaged, as well as Jackson's confirmed.

The day also saw welcome reinforcement arrive at Seven Mile strip in the shape of some new Kittyhawks, as well as the first P-39 Airacobras of the USAAF's 36th Pursuit Squadron, whose pilots were there to gain combat experience.

On the 6th one of No 75 Sqn's patrols intercepted a raid, and Les Jackson was set upon by several Zeros in head-on attacks. These he countered by returning fire and breaking away. He damaged two, but his engine was hit so he had to force-land on a reef. There, he 'stood on one wing waving his arms and doing a jig to indicate he was okay'.

Over the following days No 75 Sqn mounted several uneventful patrols and provided some escorts for the Dauntless squadron. Then at dawn on 10 April the CO took off in A29-24/D on another reconnaissance mission to Lae. The trip took longer than it was meant to, and in a letter home he recorded what happened;

'Just leaving Lae, three Japanese fighters surprised me and shot my aeroplane to bits. When I saw them I didn't attempt to fight them, as it was



Plt Off Geoff Atherton (extreme left) claimed 2.5 kills over New Guinea during the heavy fighting in April 1942, and later became one of only two pilots to make ace there. The other pilots are (from left to right) Alan Whetters, Bob Crawford and Mick Butler (No 75 Sqn records)

not over – the aircraft was attacked and the tip of one of his fingers was hit.

Meanwhile, at Moresby on the 10th, the much chastened unit continued to defy the enemy when a force of seven G3Ms, escorted by six Zeros, were intercepted high over Seven Mile strip. When one veered to the right of the Australians, Plt Off Geoff Atherton (flying A29-21/K) promptly dived after it and hit the bomber with a series of short bursts, forcing it out of the formation before he had to break away to counter an attack by an escorting Zero. However, the bomber was credited as his first kill.

Others attacked the other side of the formation in spite of the attention from the escorting fighters, and several aircraft were damaged, including two by John Piper – each streamed vapour and smoke from an engine. He too was engaged by a Zero and 'got a bullet through the glycol system and tail, but I was able to glide back to Seven Mile as we started at 24,000 ft. I made a head-on attack on two Zeros on the way home. One disappeared and the other left – I continued home as the engine had had it'.

No 75 Sqn had more successes the following morning (11 April) while escorting A-24s to Lae. The bombers were followed in their dives by three Zeros, which were in turn attacked by the escorting Australians. Amongst the latter was Flg Off Pete Masters, flying A29-48/Y (which bore the name *Poison P* above the exhaust stubs), who described his first kill;

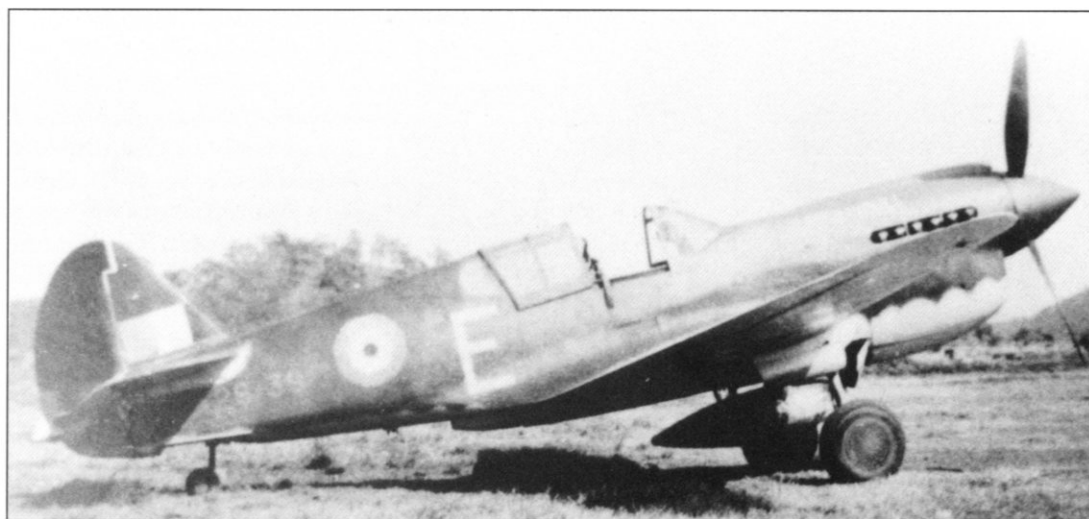
'At about 0750 hrs, when I was about halfway down, I spotted a Zero following another "Kitty". The Zero was out of range of his target as I followed him in a diving left-hand turn. A Kittyhawk could dive faster than a Zero, so I was closing fast. By now we were over the foothills behind Lae strip. For no apparent reason the Zero banked hard left into my line of sight. With a lot of left rudder, and all my strength on the stick, I got a lead on the Zero and kept pulling the trigger.

'I was then very close, and from a distance of about 50 yards I saw part of the wing fall off as well as pieces from the canopy and cowling. The Zero then turned over on its back, dived steeply and with half one wing gone, headed down with no apparent control. Later Les Jackson signed off on the action in my logbook with the words "1 Zero Confirmed".'

Flg Off Cox in A29-31 also destroyed one, but the honours went to John Piper who bagged two. He exchanged fire with two fighters before

essential to get the information back, so I relied on my extra speed. However, the aircraft I had was no faster than the enemy machines, so I decided to turn and fight them, but my guns wouldn't work! The aircraft was a mass of holes, the windscreen all shot away and on fire – I crashed into the sea three quarters of a mile off land near a village.'

He got ashore and was helped by some natives. After a dreadful time in the jungle, Jackson managed to link up with soldiers of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles, and on the 23rd he was picked up from Wau by an A-24. Even then his trials were



he caught a third Zero in a stall. He shot at it and pieces of the cowling flew off under the impact of his rounds, and his second burst caused the fighter to break up and fall into the sea. One Kittyhawk was lost. Piper damaged another Zero the following day, and one was destroyed by Flg Off Channon.

Uneventful patrols were flown until the 17th, when the CO of No 76 Sqn, Sqn Ldr B B 'Barney' Cresswell, who had been attached to the unit to gain experience, was shot down and killed. This led to Peter Turnbull being withdrawn and promoted to command the unit.

Later in the morning nine Kittyhawks led by Flt Lt Les Jackson tried to intercept a bomber formation about 60 miles from Port Moresby. The escort dived on them, and in a furious dogfight Pete Masters shared in the destruction of a Zero, taking his total to 3.5. Atherton also got involved in the action but his target was unharmed. Les Jackson was more successful, as described in his combat report;

'I chased this Zero for approximately 20 miles and delivered a stern attack, opening fire at 100 yards. As I commenced firing the Zero banked to the left and I saw tracers were entering the rear of the cockpit. I stalled the P-40 and got a burst into the engine, which immediately poured out dense black smoke. The Zero was then at 1000 ft and zooming upwards, and it stalled. The aircraft was last seen diving from the stalled position still smoking heavily, some 600 ft behind me.'

Although difficult to pinpoint events precisely, it appears that Jackson's victim may have been NAP1/c Gitaro Miyazaki, an ace with 13 victories. His loss that day was described by fellow ace Saburo Sakai, who also took part in the combat;

'With all guns blazing, the P-40 ripped through the bomber formation and poured a river of lead into Miyazaki's aeroplane. Instantly the Zero burst into flames. Miyazaki's plane drifted slowly down, trailing flame.'

No 75 Sqn received even better news on 18 April when it became known that the CO was safe. That same morning a section of eight Kittyhawks intercepted a dozen Zeros some 30 miles south of the airfield. Among the pilots was Flt Lt Alan Boyd who, with six victories in the desert, was the only RAAF pilot to become an ace flying the Gladiator.

Kittyhawk I A29-39/E of No 76 Sqn, seen here at Townsville in 1942, was flown by Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull, who had achieved much success in the desert. He also participated in the defence of Port Moresby with No 75 Sqn before joining No 76 Sqn. He was killed at Milne Bay on 27 August while attacking a tank. Amongst the first batch of P-40Es supplied to the RAAF in March 1942, A29-39 was one of only a handful of early Kittyhawk Is to survive the conflict. It was eventually sold for scrap in November 1948 (via David Wilson)

The Zeros dived on the Australians, and having broken away from the first pass, Boyd made a climbing head-on attack on a Zero which he hit and damaged. Les Jackson fired on another.

The next interception for the tired pilots came three days later when at 0830 hrs eight Kittyhawks made contact with the enemy at 21,000 ft. Plt Off Geoff Atherton (in A29-43/P) made a stern attack on one Zero, which spun out of control towards the sea. Alan Boyd fired on the same aircraft and was credited with a half share – he also damaged another. On the 23rd Atherton was again in A29-43/P when he downed another Zero.

The following day the CO's brother shot one down for his fourth victory. Leading a pair on standing patrol, he attacked some Zeros which were threatening a USAAF B-26. As Jackson fired, one of the enemy pilots turned to the right and he followed until he blacked out, but climbing back up through 7000 ft, he noticed that he had hit the cockpit and tail of the Japanese fighter. However, Jackson's wingman was shot down, as was another Kittyhawk, one of several that had arrived to assist.

Over the next few days the exhausted pilots made their final claims during their epic defence of Port Moresby. Among them was Geoff Atherton, who early on the 26th, in a diving pass and zoom attack, fired into a Zero which turned over and fell away. It was recorded as a probable.

Two days later No 75 Sqn's CO (flying A29-8/H) led five Kittyhawks into a larger force of Japanese aircraft about ten miles north of the airfield. The defenders were overwhelmed and two failed to return. One was the inspirational Sqn Ldr John Jackson, who was credited with a Zero destroyed for his seventh victory before he was seen to crash into the side of Mount Lawes. Barry Cox in A29-47/R was also lost.

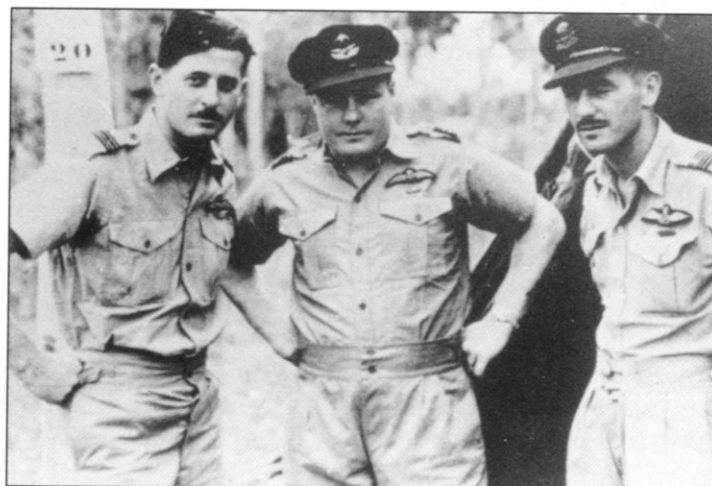
Les Jackson assumed temporary command of the squadron, which had fought itself to a virtual standstill. Relieved by two USAAF P-39 units, No 75 Sqn was withdrawn in early May to rest and rebuild.

On the 5th Les Jackson was promoted to succeed his elder brother. In the battles in the skies over New Guinea, No 75 Sqn's score stood at 18 destroyed, four probables and 29 damaged, and about 35 aircraft destroyed or damaged on the ground – but at the cost of 12 pilots. The leading scorers were Les Jackson with four, John Piper with 3.5 and Geoff Atherton with 2.5.

THE DECISIVE FACTOR

On 18 July the enemy began their overland advance through the mountains towards Moresby, with the Japanese Navy planning to seize Milne Bay, on New Guinea's eastern coast, for an advanced base. An Australian force had begun to build up there during June, with strips being made ready for Kittyhawk operations, although flooding at the No 1 strip at Gurney proved to be a real problem. After refitting, on 25 July No 75 Sqn, under Les Jackson, and No 76 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull, flew to Milne Bay to counter the Japanese advance. No 76 also had a nucleus of experienced pilots, including Sqn Ldr 'Bluey' Truscott (who had scored 13 victories in Europe flying Spitfires with No 452 Sqn) and his pal Flt Lt 'Bardie' Wawn, another successful pilot from the same unit.

Conditions on the ground were appalling, and the flying conditions of steamy low cloud were little better, but action was not long in coming. On 2 August a flight led by Flg Off Masters sighted two enemy reconnaissance



Kittyhawk Is of No 75 Sqn taxi out for another mission from Milne Bay in July 1942 during the epic defence of eastern New Guinea against the Japanese invasion force. In a little known but very significant action, Nos 75 and 76 Sqn played a major role in this first rebuff of the previously invincible enemy in this area (RAAF)

Three leading pilots of No 76 Sqn in New Guinea were (from left to right) Flt Lt 'Bardie' Wawn (three kills), Sqn Ldr Keith 'Bluey' Truscott (14 kills) and Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull (12 kills). Turnbull was killed on 27 August 1942, while Truscott died in a crash on 28 March 1943 (RAAF)

aircraft, and at lunchtime on the 4th four Zeros strafed Gurney, destroying a Kittyhawk. No 76 had seven aircraft up on patrol at the time, and Flg Off Ash attacked a Japanese aircraft, which was identified as a fixed undercarriage 'Val' dive-bomber, at a height of 4000 ft. Targeting it from astern, the enemy aircraft went into a steep climbing left-hand turn, pouring thick black smoke. Ash was forced to break away, but was later



The condition of the Milne Bay strip at Gurney is clearly evident from this photograph of No 76 Sqn's aircraft motoring along an improvised taxiway. The nearest aircraft, coded IE, wears the old-style pre-war RAAF roundel, although its original yellow outline appears to have been overpainted (M Kerr)



To differentiate its aircraft from those of its sister unit at Milne Bay No 76 Sqn added the letter I before the aircraft letter, as shown on this Kittyhawk (IO), which also carries the old-style roundel. Like many other Kittyhawks at this time, the fighter features an individual name on its nose (via David Wilson)

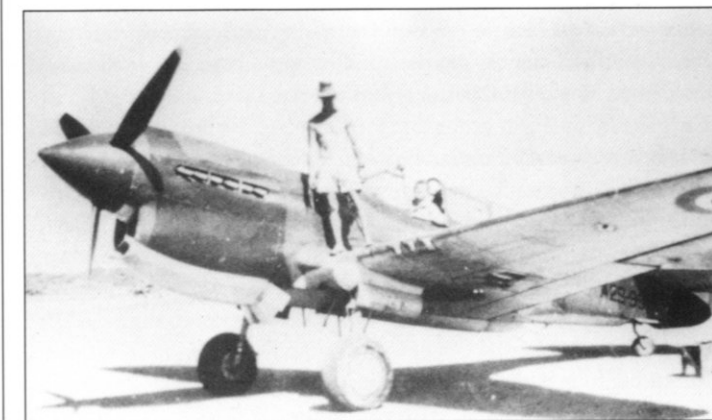
During the attempted Japanese invasion of Milne Bay in August 1942, Kittyhawk I A29-99/P was the aircraft assigned to Flg Off Geoff Atherton, who flew it on 11 August when he destroyed a Zero and claimed a second as a probable (via Neil Mackenzie)

Another photograph of Geoff Atherton's Kittyhawk A29-99. This view shows that although the new RAAF-style blue-white markings (the red being removed to avoid confusion with the enemy's *hinomaru*) had been applied to the fuselage, tail and wing upper surfaces, the old type A roundel remained on the underside of the wing. Another survivor of New Guinea, A29-99 was eventually reduced to components after suffering a forced landing whilst serving with No 2 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Mildura, in Victoria, in May 1945 (via Neil Mackenzie)

credited with a kill. 'Bardie' Wawn also spotted two aircraft above him, and as the leader dived on him the Australian sought cover in cloud.

Both squadrons maintained routine patrols, often intercepting aircraft seen on the radar plot. On the 7th Turnbull and his wingmen had to force-land on Goodenough Island, part of the d'Entrecasteaux group off the east coast, when bad weather ran them short of fuel. They were later spotted by a patrol and rescued. Parts of the aircraft were salvaged.

On 11 August the Japanese again raided Milne Bay, and 22 Kittyhawks from both units scrambled against a sweep by around a dozen Zeros. In a confused fight many of the enemy aircraft were hit, Wawn attacking two



over Gili Gili wharf, but without visible result, although other pilots from No 76 destroyed two. Among the pilots involved from No 75 Sqn was Geoff Atherton, now a flight commander, who was flying A29-99/P. He was credited with one destroyed and a probable (although this may later have been upgraded to destroyed).

During the course of the fight Plt Off Coker of No 75 Sqn spotted a Zero entering a stall turn at 1500 ft. He fired an eight-second burst from about 150 yards and watched it shudder and fall away, trailing debris. However, four Kittyhawks (A29-84, 93, 100 and 123) were lost.

Contact with the enemy increased as the planned invasion approached, and on 24 August both units scrambled against an incoming sweep. Climbing through 14,000 ft, No 76 Sqn spotted the Japanese well below, and Sgt Carroll, who had destroyed one aircraft on the 11th, dived at one of the enemy machines, his guns blazing. Others were also soon entangled with the Japanese, John Piper later reporting 'I dived on one doing a climbing turn and fired a burst which definitely hit. Another Zero dived on me and fired from dead astern – and missed'. The Kittyhawks claimed seven damaged while 'Bardie' Wawn was credited with two probables.

Rain and low cloud covered the enemy force that approached Goode-nough on 25 August. No 75 Sqn, led by John Piper, carried out an effective attack on the Japanese barges, but the main landing force of seven warships and two transports pressed on towards Milne Bay. Both units were soon strafing and bombing the convoy despite the poor weather.

Overnight, and still under the cover of rain and low cloud, the enemy began landing in the bay. Soon after dawn on the 26th Les Jackson led six Kittyhawks on reconnaissance and found enemy troops, stores and landing barges. One of his colleagues was Plt Off 'Buster' Brown in A29-133/S *Polly*, who remembered;

'We took off to the east at 0635 hrs when we saw the Japanese barges pulled into the shore along a small beach. Our method of attack was simple on this first morning. We began in line astern formation, each aircraft coming in over the bay and diving at the beach. With our firing run at a selected target completed, we did a climbing left-hand turn back along the coast. We then turned left over the bay and left again to bring us back for another attack.'

This was followed by a strike from No 76 Sqn, led by 'Bluey' Truscott, and the rapid destruction of the barges took away the flexibility of the Japanese, who were forced to move on foot. The Australian fighters also maintained air defence patrols, but found no enemy aircraft. Energetic attacks by Allied aircraft continued throughout the day with mixed results, but with a toll on the enemy nonetheless.

Early the following morning Sqn Ldr Turnbull led his men on the first attack against Japanese forces sited near Elibari, and during one of his passes he also spotted the ominous presence of enemy tanks. Just after 0700 hrs Jackson was at the head of six Kittyhawks of No 75 Sqn when he was told about a force of enemy dive-bombers approaching the bay with their fighter escort from the *Tainan Kokutai*. These were soon attacking Gurney and other targets, although several Zeros were hit by ground fire while strafing.

Returning from their morning patrol, Les Jackson (in A29-71) and his wingman, Sgt Roy Riddell, duly spotted two Zeros flown by PO1/c



No 76 Sqn's Flt Lt 'Bluey' Truscott taxis A29-142 across a steel mat taxiway at Milne Bay soon after arriving in New Guinea in late July 1942. He subsequently claimed a single victory in the P-40 prior to his death on 28 March 1943 (via Neil Mackenzie)

just above them. Watson, who climbed and attacked from various quarters until his ammunition ran out, later reported that 'smoke poured back from the engine and over the wing tips. Following another attack I noticed pieces flying off from the tailplane, rudder and fuselage'.

Jones had also attacked from close range in the face of return fire. He 'left the dive-bombers halfway down the bay and between the second and third attack I noticed a big splash on the north side of the bay. I looked back and there were only two left'. Watson and Jones were credited with one destroyed and a probable between them, while their CO may have also been credited with a probable as well as his confirmed kill. These victories were the last claimed during the attempted invasion of Milne Bay, although Flt Sgt Munro in A29-108 was lost during the engagement.

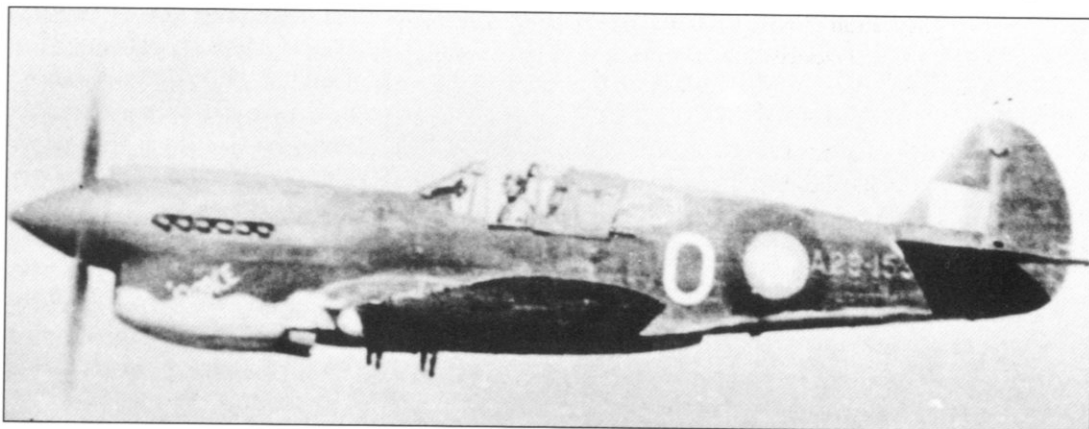
The Kittyhawks continued their ground attacks, and in the late afternoon Peter Turnbull (in A29-92/IW) returned to strafe the tanks that had been spotted earlier. Sweeping down into a ravine where the armour sat, his left wing clipped the top of a palm tree and the aircraft flipped over straight into the gorge. He was killed instantly. The loss of such an experienced and able leader was a great blow.

In support of the dogged troops on the ground, the Kittyhawks maintained their pressure, but such was the threat that most aircraft were evacuated to Port Moresby on the 28th. However, they returned the following day and continued in action until the Japanese were pushed back. Due in no small part to the incessant and very effective air attacks, on 6 September the Japanese withdrew, never to return. The following day both squadrons switched to the offensive when they escorted Beaufort and Beaufighter strikes.

The Australian commander Gen Sir Thomas Blamey summarised the RAAF contribution to the defeat, stating that 'The action of Nos 75 and 76 Sqs RAAF on the first day was probably the decisive factor'.

FEWER ENCOUNTERS

The squadrons were relieved by the P-39s of the USAAF's 8th Fighter Group (FG) on 21 September. No 75 Sqn redeployed to Horn Island and No 76, now commanded by 'Bluey' Truscott, went to the Darwin area, where it joined No 77 Sqn to take over the defence of the area from the



Kittyhawk I A29-153/O GRACE of No 75 Sqn RAAF is seen in flight over New Guinea in early 1943 with Sqn Ldr Wilf 'Woof' Arthur at the controls. He had become CO of the unit in January 1943, and added one kill and one probable (both 'Bettys') to his desert tally of seven destroyed and one probable whilst serving with the unit. On 15 April 1943 Arthur led the squadron against an estimated 100 enemy aircraft over Milne Bay but his guns would not fire. Undaunted, he tried to drive a bomber into the sea. A29-153 was later written off whilst serving with No 2 OTU at Mildura, the fighter crashing in October 1944 (David Wilson)

Kittyhawk III A29-354/SV-T of No 76 Sqn sits at dispersal on Horn Island during 1943, the fighter being regularly flown during this time by unit CO, and eight-victory ace, Sqn Ldr Gordon Steege. This aircraft was subsequently destroyed in a forced landing on Dango Island in February 1945 (RAAF)



USAAF. No daylight raids materialised, with the Japanese beginning a series of heavy night attacks instead.

In the early hours of 23 November No 77's CO, Sqn Ldr Dickie Creswell, took off in A29-113/U to intercept a force of bombers approaching Darwin. Flying at about 22,000 ft over Berrimah, he spotted three G4M 'Bettys' some 1000 ft above him. Closing to within 200 yards, he raked the formation and then attacked again. The bombers turned to port, causing the right-hand aircraft to split away. He concentrated on this one, and later described the drama that followed;

'I opened fire and tracers were seen to enter the starboard engine and top of the wing, which caught fire. My third attack was made from above on the starboard rear quarter, and tracers entered the mid wing section. The enemy aircraft exploded in the air at 16,000 ft.'

This was the first Japanese aircraft destroyed over Australia at night. It was also both Creswell's and the squadron's first victory, although No 77's air combat opportunities would ultimately prove to be few. Creswell would not become an ace, but he was to be an influential figure in RAAF fighter operations for some years. Indeed, he later commanded the unit in New Guinea and Borneo, and during the Korean War led No 77 Sqn flying Meteor F 8s, being credited with damaging a MiG-15.

In January 1943 the Spitfires of No 1(F) Wing began taking over the defence of the Darwin area and, with Japanese air raids on Milne Bay continuing, the Kittyhawk squadrons were moved there. No 75 transferred from Lowood, in Queensland, as did No 77, while No 76 remained in

Darwin for the time being. 'Bluey' Truscott's unit was mainly engaged in the mundane task of escorting convoys, although the occasional scramble was made. Successes were few, but one enemy aircraft did fall to Truscott, as recounted in his biography;

'The only big show was soon after midnight on 21 January, when "Blue" was floating in darkness seeking the enemy. He saw three bombers. Many moons had passed

since he had fought in an air combat, but he flung himself at them with the old tradition. Head on, he tackled them, into the face of their crossfire, and sent one to its destruction.'

Truscott's 14th and final victory, and his only one on the Kittyhawk, was a G4M 'Betty' of the 753rd Kokutai.

Uneventful patrols and escorts continued, with No 76 moving over to the Exmouth Gulf, in Western Australia, the following month. On 28 March Truscott was escorting an incoming Catalina, and in the haze his Kittyhawk (A29-150) struck the water and he was killed. His body was recovered the following day, and the 26-year-old ace was laid to rest in the war cemetery in Perth.

The Japanese made their 106th, and last, raid on Port Moresby on 12 April. However, they continued to attack Milne Bay, and on the morning of 14 April there were several scrambles by both Nos 75 and 77 Sqns. The latter unit's CO, Dickie Creswell, took off just after 1100 hrs;

'I was leading 12 aircraft which were scrambled to East Cape with instructions to battle climb to maximum height. I was flying A29-166 (coded AM-U – author). The Japanese formation, which was heading for shipping and the flight strips of Turnbull and Gurney, consisted of 37 'Betty' bombers flying at about 24,000 ft, with 15 escorting Zeros above. The Zeros were split in two groups, with about equal numbers on either side of the bomber formation.

'I was leading my formation of three flights of four aircraft head-on towards the Japanese bombers, which were flying in a large V formation. I was attacked by a lone Zero fighter as I led in to our attack, and one armour-piercing 30 mm shell hit the engine and I lost one or two magnetos. However, my forward speed and half an engine allowed me to shoot down the lead bomber, and I then spiralled down to our airfield and landed successfully.'

Creswell's No 2, Flg Off Kelly (in A29-182/AM-C), was credited with one destroyed and a probable, and later recalled;

'I dived and then pulled up to make a head-on attack on the leader of the port Vic of three. I opened fire at 100 yards with a long burst and saw strikes on both engines and on the front of the fuselage of my target. I then passed only about ten feet beneath this bomber. I saw another Vic of



A pre-war RAAF pilot, Queenslander Wilf 'Woof' Arthur had returned to Australia from North Africa as an ace in early 1942. Later that year he flew Kittyhawks with No 76 Sqn and became CO of No 75 Sqn in early 1943. On 10 March he shot down a G4M 'Betty', and his final claim came on 31 October when he probably destroyed another 'Betty' (B Cull)

No 77 Sqn was first used in the defence of northern Australia, but it saw only limited air combat. However, its pilots flew ground attack missions with distinction in New Guinea. Photographed late in the war Kittyhawk IV (P-40N-35) A29-1005/AM-H awaits its next mission from Goodenough Island. Delivered to the RAAF in October 1944, this aircraft was scrapped post-war (via Neil Mackenzie)



"Betty" and made a beam attack on the right-hand bomber in this formation, and saw strikes on the forward fuselage and starboard wing around the engine.

'I also saw, about 1000 ft below, the "Betty" that I had damaged in my first attack. It was still trailing blue smoke and losing altitude, so I made a dead astern attack on it and fired the remainder of my ammunition, closing from 200 yards to 15 yards. Its port engine blew up in a cloud of black smoke, and there also seemed to be an explosion in the fuselage. Both side blisters and much debris flew off it, plus a great volume of black smoke. It slipped away in a steep dive to port approximately ten miles north-west of Cape Dulcie and hit the sea, leaving a pall of black smoke and oily looking debris.'

This last major raid against Milne Bay cost the Japanese dear. During the month the Kittyhawk pilots were credited with further victories, although these were to be No 77 Sqn's final air combat successes of the war. In May the squadron moved to Goodenough Island, where it joined No 76 Sqn and the Spitfires of No 79 Sqn to cover landings on the north coast of New Guinea. No 75 Sqn, meanwhile, continued in action from Milne Bay, and on 13 June the newly-promoted Sqn Ldr Geoff Atherton became the second, and last, RAAF pilot to become an ace solely in New Guinea when he brought down another 'Betty'.

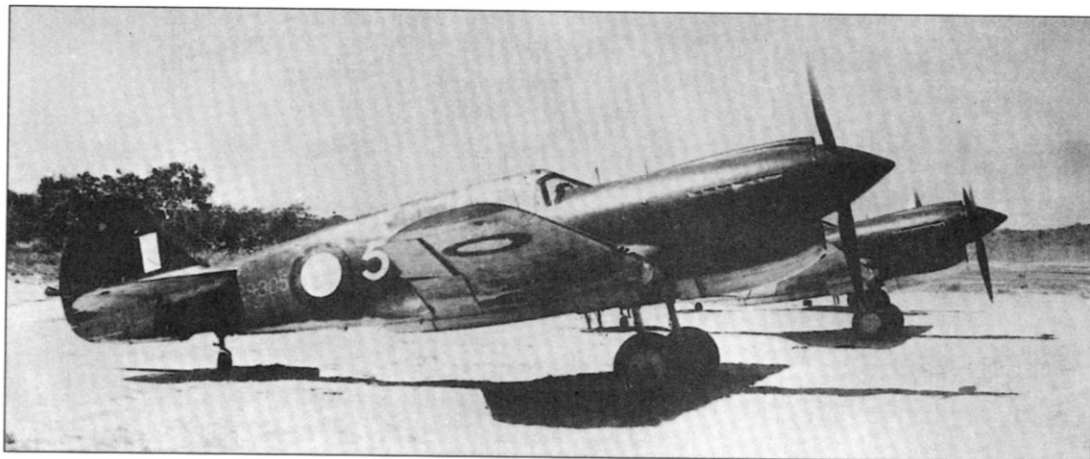
From then on the RAAF Kittyhawk squadrons, including several newly formed units (Nos 78, 80 and 86 Sqns), continued to move forward in support of the Allied advances through New Guinea, mainly flying ground-attack sorties and hitting the Japanese 4th Air Army bases.

In July 1943 No 86 Sqn, with which nine-victory desert ace Flt Lt Bob Whittle was a flight commander, moved to Merauke on the south coast of Dutch New Guinea to provide fighter cover for this small but vital port. The fighter squadron was the first to arrive there, and in early September it had its first brush with the enemy, shooting down a Zero and a Ki-43 'Oscar'. No 86 Sqn then continued patrols of coastal areas against Japanese incursions.



Geoff Atherton commences his take off run in Kittyhawk III A29-459/ GA-P at Milne Bay in 1943. His assigned machine, this aircraft was named *Cleopatra* like all of his wartime fighters. The Kittyhawk III is marked up in the standard theatre colours of the time, including the white tail surfaces which were introduced as an identification feature. Atherton became the final RAAF pilot to 'make ace' solely over New Guinea on 13 June 1943 when he shot down a G4M 'Betty'. A29-459 also survived the war and was sold for scrap in November 1948 (via Neil Mackenzie)

Kittyhawk III A29-305 was assigned to desert ace Flt Lt Bob Whittle during his time with No 86 Sqn, and it was photographed at Merauke, in New Guinea, during 1943. The fighter wore a highly polished finish and was later coded MP-K. Thus marked, it was used by Whittle to make his final claims of the war on 31 January 1944, when he destroyed a 'Zeke' and shared in the destruction of a second navy fighter, as well as a 'Betty' bomber. A29-305 was duly decorated with two small Japanese flags (R J C Whittle)



In November No 78 Sqn moved to Kiriwina from Australia to join No 73 Wing, which was also comprised of Nos 75, 76 and 77 Sqns. Its first taste of action came when it joined the others in a raid on Gasmata and the Bismarcks in conjunction with attacks from the Solomon Islands. There was, however, a regular shuffling of squadrons between wings. For example No 80 Sqn, under Atherton, had become part of No 78 Wing along with Nos 75 and 78 Sqns by early 1944.

Encounters with the Japanese in the air were now rare. The first brush for the Kittyhawk squadrons in 1944 came for No 86 at its lonely outpost on 22 January when a regular patrol over Cape Valsch found a Japanese reconnaissance 'Betty', which was shot down by Flt Lt H W Stuart. The following day a patrol some 20 miles south of the Cape intercepted a 'Betty' and two Zeros. Flt Lt Whittle (flying A29-305/MP-K) shot down the first Zero and then attacked the second with his wingman, Flt Sgt Kerrigan. This aircraft crash-landed on Kai Island and the pilot was captured. The two Kittyhawks then also destroyed the 'Betty'.

The Japanese did not return to the area, and these were the last victories by a Kittyhawk ace in the New Guinea theatre. No 78 Fighter Wing, however, saw considerable action in the ground-attack role over northern New Guinea, although the Japanese husbanded their few aircraft and so it was some months before the wing encountered any. Nonetheless, an idea of the intensity of operational flying may be gauged from the workload of No 78 Sqn, which in February 1944 flew more than 1000 hours on 368 sorties.

No 78 Sqn's eager pilots eventually found the enemy on 10 June, when a patrol of 15 Kittyhawks in four sections took part in one of the outstanding air combat successes by the RAAF over New Guinea. Having taken off from Cyclops strip, they spotted three B2N 'Kates' and their escort of 12 Ki-43 'Oscars' over the island of Biak, off the north coast of Dutch New Guinea, at between 9000 ft and 12,000 ft. It was a rare opportunity and No 78 Sqn's pilots seized it.

In a hectic dogfight, the Australians shot down seven of the fighters and two of the bombers. The unit's only loss was Flg Off Gordon White, but before he fell he downed an 'Oscar' and a 'Kate' and damaged a second B2N. Ki-43s were also shot down by Flt Lts Baker and Griffiths, Flg Off Barker and Flt Sgts Smith and Cowley (who also damaged one). Griffiths

also shared a seventh with Flg Off Blesing. Finally, the destruction of the second B2N was credited to Flt Lt Osment.

A week later, at 1450 hrs on 10 June during a convoy escort patrol, Flt Lt Danny Baker and Flg Off G O Giles of No 78 Sqn saw what turned out to be a Japanese Ki-61 'Tony' fighter several miles away at 15,000 ft and some 2000 ft below them. The Ki-61 pilot immediately began diving for home, but powering his Kittyhawk down Baker managed to close to around

When leading No 78 Wing from July 1944, Wg Cdr Geoff Atherton routinely flew Kittyhawk IV A29-629/BU-B *Cleopatra* III. Unlike his previous *Cleopatras*, it was finished in US-style camouflage, but with the specified white tail. By then No 78 Wing's main task was ground attack. This aircraft was struck off charge and broken up for parts reclamation in January 1946 (RAAF)





150 yards and opened fire, immediately scoring hits. The 'Tony' caught fire, with flames engulfing the starboard wing before it crashed into the sea. Significantly, this was the last victory for the RAAF in New Guinea, and the last of 45 victories for its Kittyhawks in this theatre. In fact Baker's kill was also the last for a Kittyhawk in Commonwealth service.

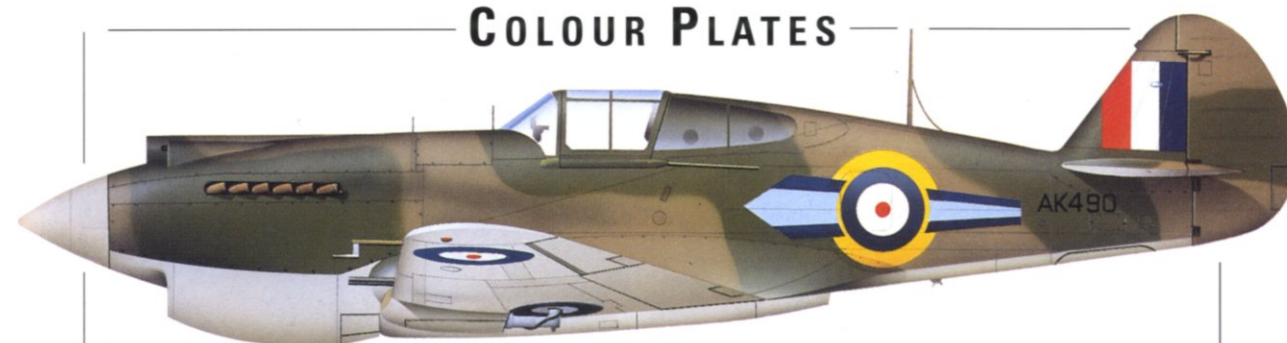
However, the aircraft continued to give sterling service in the fighter-bomber role until the end of the war. Several aces also remained on the type as squadron or wing commanders. Geoff Atherton was promoted to wing commander after leading No 80 Sqn, and he duly took over No 78 Wing, regularly flying his Kittyhawk IV A29-629/BU-B. His successor in No 80 Sqn was Sqn Ldr John Waddy, one of the leading RAAF fighter pilots of the war, who had 15.5 victories from his time in North Africa. He led the squadron until June 1945, when he too left upon receiving promotion.

His squadron, like the others, found no more air combat, but suffered steady losses, perhaps the most tragic coming on 13 January 1945 when four Kittyhawks crashed off Talaud Island on a flight from Noemfoor to Morotai. The four pilots, Flg Off Laurie Hamm, WO P Waters and Flt Sgts R W Parry and L N King, were captured by the Japanese and executed. Shortly afterwards Geoff Atherton had a narrow escape when, on 3 February, he was shot down by ground fire while on a low-level fighter-bomber sweep over the Halmaheras while flying A29-647. He ditched into shark-infested waters just off Boebole Island and came under enemy rifle fire, but was fortunately picked up by a 'Dumbo' Catalina.

The Kittyhawk squadrons continued in action over Borneo right to the end of the war. On 9 August A29-1161 of No 80 Sqn was shot down by ground fire at Samarinda, becoming the last Kittyhawk loss and the final RAAF aircraft to be downed on operations during World War 2.

CO of No 80 Sqn, Sqn Ldr John Waddy stands by his Kittyhawk IV (A29-607/BU-G) at Noemfoor in August 1944. The aircraft is adorned with his wife's name and his impressive 15.5-victory scoreboard from his desert flying in 1941-42. Waddy did not get the opportunity to increase his tally whilst serving in New Guinea. A29-607 was one of a number of surplus RAAF aircraft that were unceremoniously disposed of by burning at Labuan in January 1946 (RAAF)

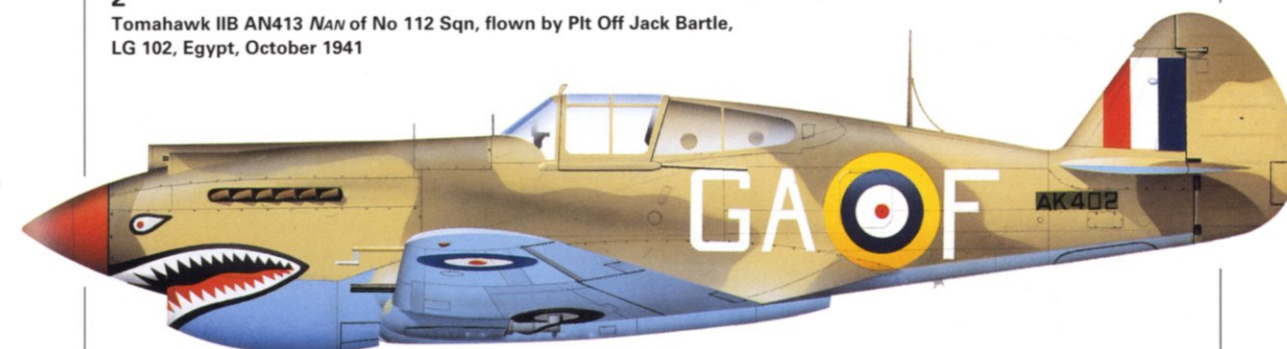
COLOUR PLATES



1
Tomahawk IIB AK490 of No 73 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Peter Wykeham-Barnes, El Gamil, Egypt, September 1941



2
Tomahawk IIB AN413 *NAN* of No 112 Sqn, flown by Plt Off Jack Bartle, LG 102, Egypt, October 1941



3
Tomahawk IIB AK402 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Plt Off Neville Duke, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, November 1941



4
Tomahawk IIB AK374 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sgt Maurice Hards, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, 26 August 1941



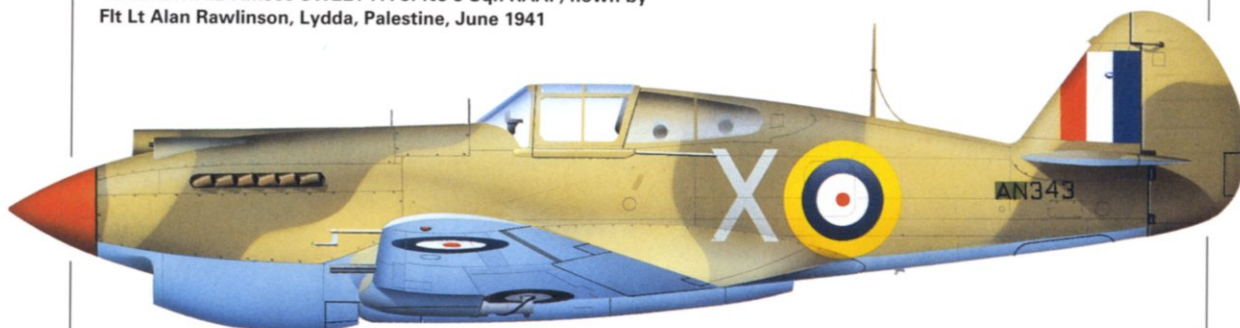
5
Tomahawk IIB AM392 *NUX VOMICA* of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sgt Bob Whittle, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, August-October 1941



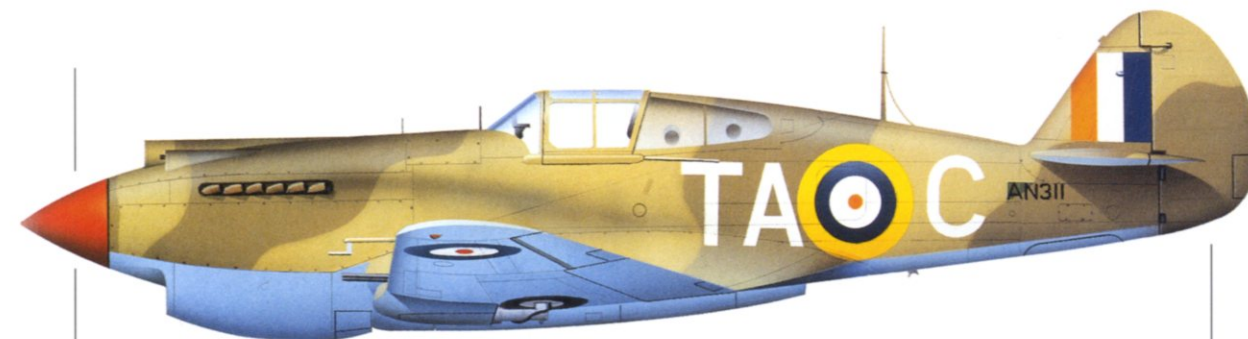
6
Tomahawk IIB AK498 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Flt Lt Clive Caldwell, LG 123 Maddelena 3, Libya, November-December 1941



7
Tomahawk IIB AM386 *SWEET FA* of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt Alan Rawlinson, Lydda, Palestine, June 1941



8
Tomahawk IIB AN343 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sgt Rex Wilson, LG 110, Egypt, November 1941



9
Tomahawk IIB AN311 of No 2 Sqn SAAF, flown by Lt Danny Saville, El Adem, Libya, 21 November 1941



10
Tomahawk IIB AM401 of No 5 Sqn SAAF, flown by Capt Johnny Human, LG 121, Egypt, 11 March 1942



11
Kittyhawk I AK759 of No 94 Sqn, flown by Sgt 'Eddie' Edwards, Gasr el Arid, Libya, 20 March 1942



12
Kittyhawk I AK578 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Flg Off Neville Duke, LG 139 Gambut Main, Libya, 14 February 1942



13
Kittyhawk I AK772 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sgt Henry Burney and Sqn Ldr Clive Caldwell, LG 142 Gambut 1, Libya, March-May 1942



14
Kittyhawk I AL225 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sgt 'Blue' Leu, LG 75, Egypt, 21 June 1942



15
Kittyhawk IA ET790 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Billy Drake, LG 91, Egypt, 8 July 1942



16
Kittyhawk I AK919 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Mike Judd, LG 91, Egypt, 6 June 1942



17
Kittyhawk III FR120 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Flt Lt Gordie Troke, Castel Benito, Libya, February 1943



18
Kittyhawk IA ET788 of No 260 Sqn, flown by Sgt Ron Cundy, Gasr el Arid, Libya, May 1942



19
Kittyhawk III 42-45798 (FR829) of No 260 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr O V Hanbury, Castel Benito, Libya, January 1943



20
Kittyhawk III FR350 of No 260 Sqn, flown by Flg Off 'Eddie' Edwards, Castel Benito, Libya, January 1943



21

Kittyhawk I AK897 of No 450 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sgt Don McBurnie, LG 142 Gambut 1, Libya, May 1942



22

Kittyhawk I AK634 of No 450 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt 'Willy' Williams, LG 91, Egypt, 5 July 1942



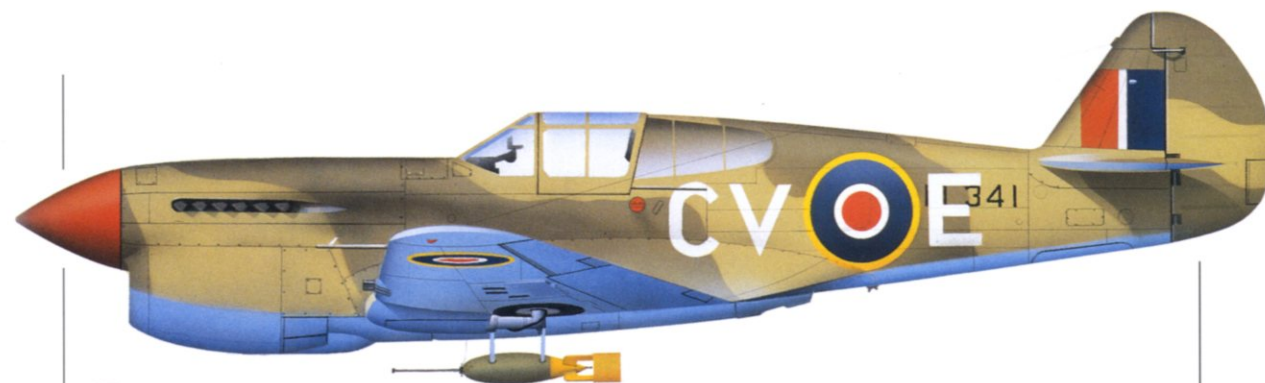
23

Kittyhawk I AK903 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt 'Nicky' Barr, Sidi Haneish, Egypt, March 1942



24

Kittyhawk IA ET953 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes, LG 91, Egypt, August-September 1942



25

Kittyhawk IIA FL341 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Wg Cdr H F 'Billy' Burton, OC No 239 Wing, Marble Arch, Libya, 28 December 1942



26

Kittyhawk I AL173 of No 2 Sqn SAAF, flown by Lt Vernon Lindsay, Gambut, Libya, 7 June 1942



27

Kittyhawk IA ET512 of No 4 Sqn SAAF, flown by Flg Off John Waddy, LG 97, Egypt, 21 July 1942



28

P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-9 of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt Les Jackson, Port Moresby, New Guinea, April 1942



29
P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-39 of No 76 Sqn RAAF, flown by
Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull, Weir Field, Townsville, Australia,
May-June 1942



30
P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-99 *CLEOPATRA* of
No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flg Off Geoff
Atherton, Milne Bay, New Guinea,
August 1942



31
P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-153 *GRACE* of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by
Sqn Ldr 'Woof' Arthur, Port Moresby, New Guinea, January 1943



32
P-40K Kittyhawk III A29-459 *CLEOPATRA* of
No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Geoff
Atherton, Horn Island, New Guinea, mid 1943



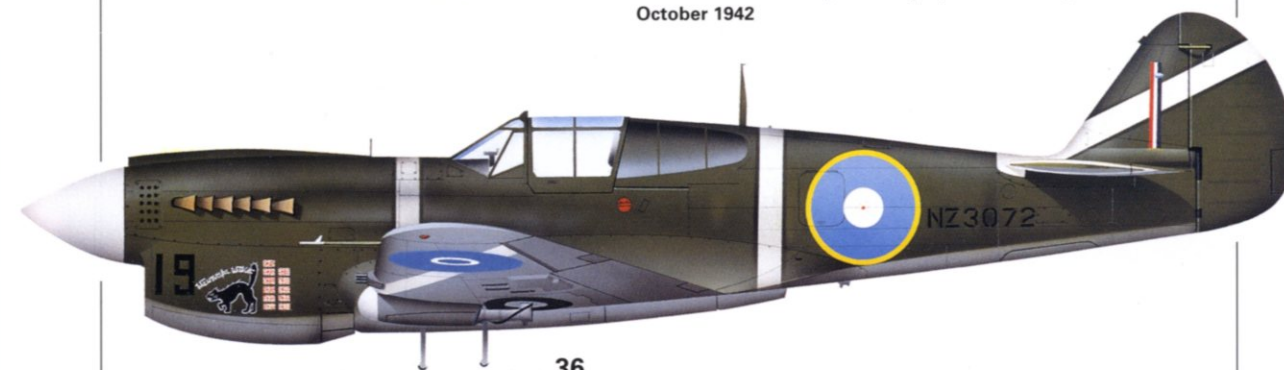
33
P-40M Kittyhawk III A29-305 of No 86 Sqn RAAF, flown by
Flt Lt Bob Whittle, Merauke, New Guinea, 23 January 1944



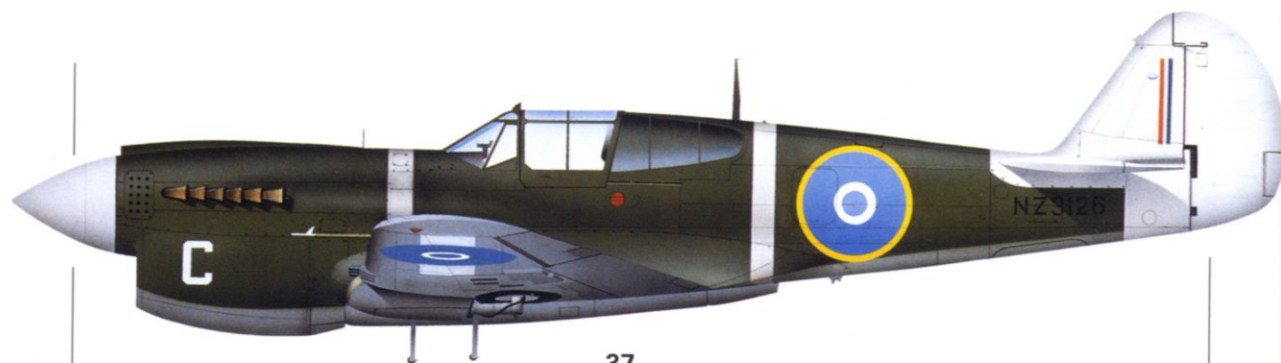
34
P-40N-20 Kittyhawk IV A29-607 *VE* of No 80 Sqn RAAF, flown by
Sqn Ldr John Waddy, Noemfoor, Dutch New Guinea,
September-October 1944



35
P-40E Kittyhawk IA NZ3040 of No 15 Sqn RNZAF, flown by
Flt Lt Johnnie Gibson, Whenuapai, New Zealand,
October 1942



36
P-40M Kittyhawk III NZ3072 *Wairarapa Wildcat* of No 14 Sqn RNZAF,
flown by Flg Off Geoff Fiskin, Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, July 1943



37
P-40N-1 Kittyhawk IV NZ3126 of No 17 Sqn/No 4 Servicing Unit RNZAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Guy Newton, Ondonga, New Georgia, January 1944



38
P-40K Warhawk 42-45945 of No 111 Sqn RCAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Ken Boomer, Umnak, Aleutian Islands, 25 September 1942



39
Mohawk IV 2522 of 'B' Flight No 3 Sqn SAAF, flown by Capt Jack Parsonson, Aiscia, Somaliland, September-October 1941



40
Mohawk IV BB928 *Cymru am Byth* of No 155 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr 'Porky' Jefferies, Agartala, Bengal, India, January 1943

THE SOUTH PACIFIC

In addition to its service against the Japanese over Australia and New Guinea, the Kittyhawk also saw extensive action with the RNZAF during the bitter fighting in the Solomon Islands. Aside from having units serving with the RAF in Britain, New Zealand also supplied sufficient pilots to man two RAF fighter squadrons – Nos 67 and 243 – flying the lamentable Buffalo in Singapore. Then, in 1941, an RNZAF-controlled unit (No 488 Sqn) was also formed in Singapore, again flying the Buffalo.

When the Japanese began their offensives in the Pacific in December 1941, there were no RNZAF fighter units actually based in New Zealand. The country, and its neighbouring island chains, was now a potential target, and virtually defenceless against a Japanese carrier strike.

After the fall of Java in March 1942, the American government proposed that the defence of the Pacific east of Singapore should be the responsibility of US-led forces, with the South Pacific sub-command, of which New Zealand was part, controlled by the US Navy.

In response to the deteriorating situation in Asia, the New Zealand government had appealed to the British for modern aircraft in early 1942, and it was agreed that a number of P-40E Kittyhawks from RAF orders should be diverted there, as well as to Australia. The first of the new fighter squadrons, No 14, was set up at Ohakea in April 1942, its nucleus being formed by the survivors of No 488 Sqn and the other Singapore-based Buffalo units after the fall of Singapore.

It was equipped with P-40Es, and was at first commanded by Sqn Ldr J N Mackenzie, who had seen a lot of action with No 41 Sqn during the Battle of Britain, claiming six kills and four probables. One of his experienced pilots was Plt Off Geoff Fiskien who had fought the Japanese in Malaya and destroyed six aircraft flying a Buffalo. He later recalled;

'After the fall of Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies, those of us who had managed to evade capture by the enemy found our way to

Flt Lt Johnny Gibson, an ace with 12 victories over France, formates on a Hudson in Kittyhawk IA NZ3040/JZ-1 of No 15 Sqn in October 1942. The aircraft wears RAF-style camouflage which was changed before the unit's deployment to the Solomons (J A A Gibson)



Australia as best we could, and were then repatriated to New Zealand.

'In April 1942 the remnants of No 488 Sqn, both pilots and ground staff, together with a few pilots from No 243 Sqn RAF (Fisken had served with this unit in Singapore - author) gathered at Ohakea, where we were formed into No 14 Sqn under Sqn Ldr J N Mackenzie. Our equipment was the Kittyhawk, a heavier and less manoeuvrable machine than the Buffalo I had flown in Malaya. Nevertheless, the Kittyhawk was an aeroplane for which I shall always have a great respect and affection. It was extremely rugged, with a great deal of structural redundancy.'



Sqn Ldr Johnny Gibson DFC joined No 15 Sqn when it was formed in June 1942, and returned to undertake a second tour with the unit as its CO in December 1943. Leading it with distinction during the heavy action over Rabaul, he made his only claim against the Japanese on 23 January 1944 when he downed a 'Zeke'. The 'Donald Duck' motif that decorates his life jacket was also worn on the side of his assigned aircraft (*J A A Gibson*)

FIRST DEPLOYMENT

The second fighter unit, No 15 Sqn, formed at Whenuapai, near Auckland, on 1 June 1942 under Sqn Ldr A Crichton, and he too had a sprinkling of experienced pilots. Both flight commanders were New Zealanders in the RAF who had seen combat in the UK. Flt Lt Mike Herrick had flown nightfighters and shot down four Luftwaffe bombers and damaged another during the Blitz. Flt Lt Johnny Gibson had seen action in France and during the Battle of Britain, and had a score of around a dozen destroyed. Both men had been decorated with the DFC.

In July the third squadron was formed when No 16 was stood up at Ohakea and began its intensive work up. That month No 14 got a new

Kittyhawk IAs NZ3008/HQ-B UMSLOPPOGAS, NZ3035/HQ-Q and NZ????/HQ-A PARKYAKARKUS of No 14 Sqn formate on the squadron's Harvard trainer for a photo shoot in 1942. The squadron adjutant acted as photographer on the understanding that the 'Kittys' came up one at a time and kept their distance. He noted that, led by CO Sqn Ldr 'Boy' Brooker (seven kills), 'the boys literally rubbed wings until I gave them a call on the R/T and appealed to the pilot to take his wingtip out of my lens!' (*RNZAF*)



CO, Sqn Ldr REP 'Boy' Brooker, who had fought in Europe and against the Japanese over Singapore. He had seven or eight kills to his name.

The crucial naval battles at Coral Sea and Midway and the Australian actions in New Guinea had largely halted the immediate danger by the autumn of 1942, but from their base in Rabaul, on New Britain, the Japanese had moved down the Solomon Islands chain as far as Guadalcanal. This became the scene of bitter fighting with US forces, and ultimately presented the RNZAF fighter units with a combat role too.

The islands to the north and west of Guadalcanal were all dominated by the Japanese, these flanking 'the Slot' – an open water channel approximately 350 miles long and 70 wide that stretched between the islands of the Solomon group from Guadalcanal at its southern end to Bougainville in the north-west. From Guadalcanal, the next group was the Russell Islands, some 50 miles away, then the New Georgia group (on which Munda strip was later built), including Rendova Island. Kolombangara was next, followed by Vella Lavella, the Shortlands then Bougainville, with its important enemy strip at Kahili. To the north side of 'the Slot' lay Tulagi harbour, Santa Isabel and Choiseul. This was the scene for the RNZAF's hectic fighter actions from mid 1943.

Following the desperate fighting to seize Guadalcanal, the Americans requested in October 1942 that an RNZAF fighter squadron be deployed to the island of Tonga for local defence, thereby releasing a USAAF unit for service in the Solomons. Crichton's squadron was selected, and took over the 68th PS's well-worn P-40Ks upon arrival on Tonga. These were subsequently used for patrols around the island.

However, in early March 1943 No 15 Sqn was ordered forward to Espiritu Santo, in the New Hebrides. Sadly, the CO was killed in an accident on Fiji and was replaced by Mike Herrick, who in spite of his combat experience was still only 21. Gibson, however, had been recalled to New Zealand for staff duties.

As squadrons moved north they were re-equipped with newer P-40M Kittyhawk IIIs. By the beginning of April No 14 had moved to Espiritu Santo and No 15 got its Kittyhawk IIIs when the unit reached the island. On the 26th the latter unit moved north to Guadalcanal and, it was hoped, action.

By this time Guadalcanal had been secured, although Japanese air raids were frequent, the enemy having been reinforced by the air groups from the carriers *Junyo* and *Hiyo*.



Successful in the UK with four victories, Sqn Ldr Mike Herrick led No 15 Sqn to Guadalcanal in April 1943, where on 6 May he claimed the first RNZAF fighter kill in the South Pacific. He later returned to the UK but was shot down and killed off the Danish coast in a Mosquito VI whilst serving as a flight commander with No 305 'Polish' Sqn on 16 June 1944 (*B Cull*)

P-40K Kittyhawk IIIs, including NZ3059 and NZ3051, of No 14 Sqn refuel when staging through Norfolk Island en route from New Zealand to the Solomon Islands on 30 March 1943. NZ3051 was lost during the transit a couple of days later. These aircraft first engaged the Japanese on 12 June (*RNZAF*)



The day after arriving, No 15 Sqn flew its first escorts and shipping patrols. In addition, defensive patrols for Guadalcanal and the Russell Islands were mounted, and action was not long in coming. During escort by two Kittyhawks of an RNZAF Hudson on 6 May to an area where the enemy was known to be active, a floatplane was spotted about three miles away at 1500 ft. In poor weather the fighters stalked the A6M2-N 'Rufe' until Sqn Ldr Herrick 'fired a two-second burst from astern which sent it blazing into the sea'. It was the squadron's first success, and also the first for the Kiwi fighter force in the South Pacific.

The unit flew its first bomber escort for the US Marine Corps two days later when it accompanied Dauntlesses sent to attack Japanese destroyers. Much of the rest of May was spent flying routine patrols, however, although pilots scrambled to meet a raid on the 13th. Despite the fighters seeing a lot of action, No 15 Sqn had only one aircraft badly shot up.

By early June an allied invasion of New Georgia was imminent, so Japanese raids were expected to disrupt the preparations. The first came on the 7th, when Herrick and a dozen Kittyhawks eagerly scrambled for their first major action. Vectored to cover the Russell Islands, they orbited at 22,000 ft in very poor weather, but three Zeros were spotted and engaged by the CO's section. The kudos of downing the RNZAF's first Zero went to Sgt RA Martin, who reported 'a burst penetrated the Zero's fuel tanks – flames enveloped the machine and it fell into the sea'. Within 20 minutes three more Zeros fell, two to Flt Lts Duncan and Greig for their only kills. Herrick, meanwhile, claimed his second Jap in a lengthy combat. A contemporary report described what happened;

'He chased his Zero many miles before lining it up in his gunsights and destroying it. He was attacked in turn, but an American Corsair drove off his attacker. The American then had to bail out and the Jap pilots attempted to strafe him as he floated down, but this time Herrick harassed the Japs and drove them away from his new-found friend. Herrick's aircraft landed with a 20 mm cannon hole in one wing and six other holes made by Jap shells.'

After landing back at base Herrick's laconic remark to his groundcrew was 'It was a damned good show!' An American report on the New Zealander's contribution to the battle described it as 'outstanding'.

THE FIRST ACE

The replacement RNZAF Kittyhawk squadron in the Solomons was No 14, which was led to Guadalcanal by Sqn Ldr S G Quill on 11 June. Its pilots were soon in action. The second major Japanese raid by some 120 aircraft came on the 12th, and eight aircraft from No 14 and 12 from No 15 were among the 90 fighters scrambled from Guadalcanal.

No 14 Sqn hit a formation of Zeros in the raid's preliminary fighter sweep and six fell to their guns, with one each to Flt Lt Oldfield and Plt Off Stanley, while Flt Lt Brown claimed two of his eventual three kills in this combat. The other two fell to Kittyhawk III NZ3072 '19' (the *Wairarapa Wildcat*), flown by the Malaya ace Flg Off Geoff Fiskien. After experiencing combat in the Kittyhawk, he later recalled that 'your enemy could blast a lot of big holes in it, but it would still get you home'.

The success of No 14 Sqn and others persuaded the bombers to turn back, although sadly the action also saw the first Kiwi fighter loss when



Flg Off Geoff Fiskien taxis NZ3072/19 out on another mission from Henderson Field in July 1943. Due to the risk of confusing the red disc of the RNZAF roundel with the Japanese *hinomaru*, the red area was reduced to a tiny one inch dot, and later eliminated in favour of a blue central disk. The various white bars were a further identification aid (Don Noble)

Plt Off Rex Weber of No 14 Sqn sits on his Kittyhawk that displays the two victory markings for his kills over Rendova on 1 July 1943. He had previously fought in Malaya in Buffaloes (Don Noble)



Flg Off Morpeth (in NZ3069) was posted missing. To their intense frustration, however, No 15 Sqn failed to make contact with the enemy, its combat on the 7th turning out to be its last of this first tour in the islands. Later on the 12th the unit left for Espiritu and home, where the CO told reporters 'Give the kudos to the groundcrews. We owe it all to them.'

For No 14 Sqn there was more action in store, and on 16 June the Japanese launched their biggest raid on Guadalcanal to date when more than 100 fighters and dive-bombers were sortied. Only a few bombers managed to reach their target, and over Savo Island No 14 Sqn's Kittyhawks dived into a fight with more than 30 Japanese fighters. The enemy got a severe mauling from the Kiwi fighters, No 14 Sqn sending five Zeros down. Successful pilots included Flg Off Clarke, who claimed two of his eventual total of three, and John Oldfield who also shot down two.

The New Georgia operation began four days later when Marines landed on Segi Island, and on the 29th the main force was put ashore on Rendova Island. Over the next few days No 14 Sqn saw some ferocious fighting over the beaches. Their patrols on the 30th made no contact, but that night US troops landed on Munda, leading to several heavy attacks as the Marines struggled inland through the swamp and jungle.

A morning patrol of Rendova by eight Kittyhawks in company with USAAF and US Navy fighters met an incoming raid of more than 70 aircraft. No 14 Sqn's section dived out of the sun onto a formation of escorting Zeros at 7000 ft, but in the heavy cloud became dispersed. The Kiwis claimed seven destroyed and three probables nonetheless, with No 14 Sqn's leader, Brown, claiming his third and final kill.

Flg Off Rex Weber, who had flown Buffaloes in Malaya, where he had been wounded and may have

shared in the destruction of a Zero, recalled, 'An unlucky Jap flew across the leader's path and the next second fell in flames'.

However, Flt Lt Brown had been hit and his aircraft was losing fuel. He was forced to bail out, and after four-and-a-half hours in the water, he was fortunate to be picked up by a rescue boat. Weber exacted his revenge when he shot down two and claimed a probable;

'Ahead, a Zero pulled up almost to a stall, when I caught it in my gunsights and sent it crashing into the sea. Joining another New Zealander, I then saw a Zero about to attack from the rear starboard quarter. I dived and came up under the Japanese and then managed to turn inside the enemy and let him have my opening fire. The Jap turned on his back and burst into flames on his way down to the graveyard of many another Jap aircraft off Munda Point.'

Five other pilots claimed, including Sgt R C C Nairn, who had his first victory, but Plt Off Burton, a veteran from No 488 Sqn in Malaya, was hit near Munda and bailed out. He was never seen again. Such losses, and the primitive living conditions endured in the Solomons, certainly brought home the realities of war, but morale remained high, as recorded at the time by the squadron's adjutant;

'There was the usual line in bull retailed with gusto and laughter. Most of the talk, of course, centred around the day's patrols and any action that had taken place. They used to get together in one tent, squat on the coral floor and with the aid of diagrams in the dust relive their manoeuvres and plan exactly what they would do if lucky enough to join action the next day. The CO's tent was a typical gathering place, and if what was said didn't make Tojo's ears red, nothing ever would!'

American Independence Day, 4 July, proved a red letter day for the squadron during a fierce 30-minute fight. Eight Kittyhawks in two flights, led by Sqn Ldr Quill and Flg Off Fiskin, patrolled over Rendova at

The most famous Kiwi Kittyhawk was P-40K NZ3072/19 *Wairarapa Wildcat* of No 14 Sqn. The Kittyhawk III was usually flown by Flg Off Geoff Fiskin DFC who is seen with it at Henderson Field in July 1943. He shot down five Japanese aircraft during his time in the Solomons to add to the six he had claimed during his service in Malaya flying Buffaloes. Both he and his groundcrew originated from the Wairarapa area of New Zealand, hence the fighter's name. The black cat had originally been painted on by a USAAF repair unit which had salvaged the aircraft after an accident (RNZAF)



14,000 ft and were bounced by more than 40 Japanese fighters. They were soon fighting for their lives. After probably destroying a Zero, Quill was hit and wounded in the shoulder, but managed to make it to the Russells to crash-land. Fiskin led his flight into the enemy, as a contemporary account of his combat records;

'A swarm of Zeros swept down on them. In the first burst one of the New Zealanders was put out of action, bullets shattering his instrument panel and destroying his switches, but miraculously leaving the pilot unscathed. The Jap who did the damage probably never knew what hit him – it was fine shooting by Fiskin. Eight others promptly fastened on to him, but before they could revenge themselves he had swooped out of range, pulling out at 8000 ft, only to see another bunch of Zeros down below at 5000 ft.

'He dived and got the last man in that formation, then put his *Wairarapa Wildcat* into a climb in an effort to rejoin his flight. On the way up he sighted a formation of 18 "Betty" bombers at about his own height. He fired a three-second burst, and as one enemy dived straight down he followed it. Grimly he stuck to it, firing all the way until at 9000 ft the bomber blew up. "Fisky" arrived home with his tailplane in tatters, his elevators out of action and the fuselage liberally peppered. His two mechanics, who were also from Wairarapa, promptly brought out the red paint and added three more Jap flags to those already on the fuselage.

'Japanese aircraft of that time, for all their superiority in range, speed, manoeuvrability and armament, could not survive much combat damage, and their highly experienced crews usually went down with them. The Japanese, unlike the Allies, had no effective training system to replace lost crews, and their combat worthiness soon deteriorated markedly.'

These combats made the former shepherd the first New Zealander to 'make ace' in the Solomons and, with his six victories from Malaya, the Commonwealth's top scorer against Japan during the war. In September he received the DFC, but was invalided from the air force in December.

It had been a notable day for No 14 Sqn, and in this tour the unit established its position as the RNZAF's top-scoring squadron in the Pacific.

The last of 11 major raids on Rendova came on 7 July, but No 14 made no further claims. After a highly eventful tour, the unit was replaced at Guadalcanal by No 16 Sqn and left for Espiritu Santo. The squadron was duly replaced there by No 17, the newest Kittyhawk unit. Sqn Ldr Quill later received the DFC for his work during the tour, as did Flt Lt Oldfield.

— ISLAND HOPPING —

In the Solomons, No 16 Sqn, led by Sqn Ldr J S Nelson, flew the P-40N Kittyhawk IV and had Flt Lts R A 'Spud' Spurdle DFC and Jack Day as flight commanders. Spurdle, a New Zealander in the RAF, was an experienced fighter pilot with eight victories from his service in England flying Spitfires.

The unit initially flew escort sorties for familiarisation prior to

On 4 July 1943 Flg Off Geoff Fiskin was flying this Kittyhawk III (NZ3060/9) on a patrol over Rendova when he shot down two A6M Zeros and a G4M 'Betty'. These victories took his score to 11 – the highest of any Commonwealth pilot against the Japanese (J Strickland)





No 14 Sqn departing. With Japanese troops still resisting around Munda, its combat debut came on 31 July when pilots were ordered over Munda to counter an incoming raid. However, the Kittyhawks were hit from above and two fell, although one pilot was picked up. It was a disappointing beginning, and the veteran Spurdle was scathing:

'The cruel facts were these – it was the first fighter versus fighter combat these green pilots were in, and they tried to mix it with vastly superior numbers flying vastly superior aircraft.'

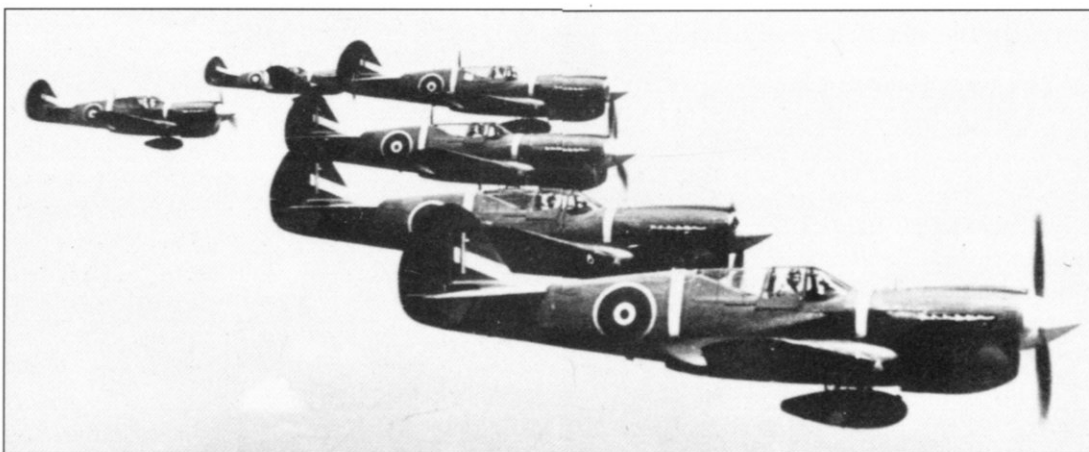
However, this poor start was put behind them during August when, on the 10th, Flt Lt J H Arkwright, who would assume command in October, shot down a Zero during a scramble. Having opened its 'book', Spurdle increased the tally three days later when, at 1450 hrs, he led a scramble. Forty minutes later they were at 21,000 ft and Spurdle found;

'A gaggle of Zeros at our height about three miles away looping and rolling all over the sky – no formation at all! They looked as if they were on holiday. I "tally hoed" and bored straight into the bastards, and a dogfight ensued. A "Zeke" flew directly in front of me from port to starboard at a range of about 300 yards, but I must have missed him, not seeing any hits. Turning to port, I attacked another "Zeke", closing to less than 50 yards and blowing fragments from its starboard wing. Then I saw another slightly below, which was boring into attack. It half rolled and I closed, diving after it in quick aileron turns.

"Kittys" could dive like falling bricks, and I got in about a four-second steady burst. It was time to leave. I chased a "Hamp" down to 6000 ft in

In April 1943 the P-40K Kittyhawk IIIs of No 14 Sqn were ordered forward to Guadalcanal for the unit's first operational tour, during which it saw considerable action alongside US units in the bitter fighting in the Solomon Islands. In July the squadron was withdrawn to Espiritu Santo to rest and re-equip, where this photograph was taken. Note the RNZAF Hudsons sharing ramp space with the Kittyhawks (RNZAF)

These No 16 Sqn Kittyhawks were photographed en route to the Solomon Islands for their first tour in 1943. The squadron produced no aces, although one established ace, Flt Lt 'Spud' Spurdle, claimed two destroyed and two damaged during his tour. Other successful pilots included Sqn Ldr J H Arkwright, Flg Off Stan Duncan and Flt Lt 'Van' Vanderpump, each with two kills (Don Noble)



a vertical dive. My cockpit misted over and, pulling out to one side and levelling off, I saw the "Hamp" bury itself in Wana Wana lagoon. Another aircraft crashed a mile further out. I couldn't see my No 2 (Flt Sgt Noel Pirie – author) and hoped like hell his wasn't the other aeroplane.'

It wasn't. Having gathered another Kittyhawk, they flew back to Segi strip;

'We were met by Noel Pirie, chirpy as a cricket, and I was able to tell him, "I saw your Jap hit the water near mine – good show!"'

It was Pirie's first victory and Spurdle's ninth.

The squadron did even better on the 15th while covering the US landings on Vella Lavella. 'B' Flight, led by Jack Day, shot down three 'Val' dive-bombers, two falling to Flg Off Stan Duncan and Day destroying a Zero for his only kill. WO Voss shot down the third 'Val'.

Spurdle was No 16 Sqn's leading pilot by some margin, and his regular No 2 was Pirie, and it was not only Japanese aircraft that they hunted. During the late afternoon of 25 August during a shipping search, they spotted three enemy torpedo boats moored in a narrow bay off Choiseul, and in a concentrated strafing attack set them on fire.

The following day No 16 Sqn provided three Kittyhawks as close escort to USAAF B-24 Liberators sent to bomb Kahili airfield, on Bougainville. Spurdle recalled;

'I saw Jap fighters coming up in a quarter attack from "four o'clock" at Pirie. I warned him and at the same time saw a mix of eight or nine "Zekes" at "ten o'clock" at our level. These machines bored in in a semi head-on attack on the bombers behind us. I fired on the leader, seeing a few strikes. At 400 yards he started to fire, rolling on his back, but at nothing – he was stuffed. Black smoke from both wing roots poured out and, looking back and below, I saw the thing falling in a ball of flames.

'Away over to starboard I saw Pirie get a Jap, which burst into flames and hurtled down. Sgt Laurie came up to drive a Zero off my tail. The fight then got very confused, and we three became separated in the melee. There was only one thing to do and that was to put our noses down in screaming dives for the deck.'

These were the squadron's final claims of this tour, but sadly not its last loss, as on the 30th Flg Off Stan Duncan, the double victor of a fortnight earlier, went missing whilst escorting B-24s to Bougainville. The last mission of No 16 Sqn's first tour was on 3 September, the day New Georgia was finally cleared of the enemy.

As No 16's tour ended, the experienced No 15 Sqn, still led by Mike Herrick, returned for a second tour. Due to the US Command requesting the presence of a second RNZAF fighter squadron in the Solomons, No 15 Sqn was followed shortly thereafter by the new No 17 Sqn, commanded by Sqn Ldr P G H Newton. Acting as a reserve in Espiritu Santo was another new Kittyhawk IV unit, No 18 Sqn, led by the experienced Sqn Ldr Oldfield DFC.

The two forward squadrons were soon providing escorts for raids on Kahili as the softening up for the invasion of Bougainville began and the mopping up on Vella Lavella continued. Such missions continued through to the end of September 1943, with the only successful aerial combat, and the opening of No 17's 'book', coming during an escort for

an Avenger attack on Kahili on 23 September. Flt Lt D F St George and Flg Off G R B Highet shared in the destruction of a Zero, the former also claiming a probable. These were St George's only claims, but he went on to have a distinguished career with the RNZAF, rising to become the Chief of the Air Staff.

Better luck came the New Zealanders' way on 1 October while escorting shipping off Vella Lavella. Eight of No 15's Kittyhawks, led by Mike Herrick, together with 12 US Marine Corsairs, waded into hapless Japanese dive-bombers as they attacked the ships, and seven 'Vals' fell to the Kiwis. Herrick shared one and damaged another while Flt Lt Grimsdale and Flg Off Davis each destroyed two. No 15's diarist said of the action;

'Herrick had to make some rapid decisions and he wasted no time. A couple of clipped radio orders and he and his men, with sticks pressed hard forward, screamed down to attack. The affair was short lived. In a fast melee the Japanese attack was broken up and flaming dive-bombers – seven of them – in quick succession crashed into the sea.'

Soon Vella Lavella was secured. On 11 October No 17 Sqn had another opportunity for combat when a patrol, led by the CO, escorted Avengers to Kahili. They sighted a lone US fighter under attack from several Zeros and intervened. Guy Newton in Kittyhawk IV NZ3132 shot one into the sea to open his score, while a second fell to Flt Lt Buchanan.

To support the planned landings in the north, airfields had been established on some of the captured islands, including New Georgia, where a base was set up at Ondonga. Both Kittyhawk squadrons moved there as the RNZAF Fighter Wing, led by Wg Cdr T O Freeman DSO DFC, a distinguished bomber pilot. Coincident with the move, No 18 Sqn headed north and replaced No 17, which moved back to Espiritu Santo.

The move brought the New Zealanders within 120 miles of southern Bougainville, and less than 400 miles from the enemy's South Pacific citadel, Rabaul. From Vella, the next step was the capture of the Treasury Islands, where troops landed on 27 October. They were covered from Ondonga by the New Zealanders and the co-located US squadrons – the USAAF's 70th FS and the F4U Corsairs of Lt Cdr Tom Blackburn's VF-17, the famous 'Jolly Rogers'.

The fighters maintained patrols throughout the day, and in the afternoon Kittyhawks from both Nos 15 and 18 Sqns engaged one of the raids. Herrick shared a Zero and Flg Off Davies sent another down for No 15 Sqn's share. No 18 opened its account with Zeros falling to Flg Off Leonard Rayner and Sgt Cliffe – Rayner's was the 50th Japanese aircraft to fall to the Kiwis in the Solomons.

Further success came the way of the newest squadron on 1 November, as troops went ashore at Empress Augusta Bay, north of Cape Torokina on Bougainville, under heavy air cover. Shortly after 0800 hrs eight Kittyhawks flying over the landings were vectored onto a large formation of Zeros above the island. Flt Lt R H 'Jimmy' Balfour led his section to swoop down in a power dive from 16,000 ft. They came up behind the enemy and Balfour opened fire at 80 yards. One fell away out of control as a second Zero, hit in a fuel tank, exploded in mid-air for him to claim the first two of his eventual 4.5 victories.

Rayner added another two to his bag, and three other pilots also claimed kills in a whirling fight against a determined enemy.

Photographed at a parade in Auckland, New Zealand, in February 1944, this Kittyhawk is thought to have been the aircraft of the third RNZAF pilot to 'make ace' in the Solomon Islands, Flt Lt 'Jimmy' Balfour of No 18 Sqn, who claimed four and one shared victories. He was flying '19' on 1 November 1943 when he downed two Zeros to claim his first victories (*Don Noble*)



The period following the landings was one of intense activity. Japanese carrier air groups reinforced Rabaul, and an enemy cruiser force sortied from the fortress. In reply, US carriers struck at the enemy stronghold, forcing the withdrawal of the mauled carrier groups.

The RNZAF Fighter Wing flew more than 1000 sorties during the month, mainly defensive patrols over the expanding beachheads as ground forces fought to consolidate their positions, and while engineers constructed a forward airstrip near Cape Torokina. During one patrol on 17 November Rayner shot down a 'Val' for his fourth, and final, kill – he subsequently received the DFC.

Over the same area on the 22nd a defensive patrol from No 18 Sqn spotted more than 30 Zeros below them and down-sun. Although outnumbered, 'Jimmy' Balfour led his men in a classic bounce. A report written at the time stated that 'One Japanese pilot made a determined head-on attack on Flt Lt Balfour. The enemy dived down firing, and bullets tore into the New Zealander's aircraft'.

Five Zeros had been shot down and others damaged by the time the Kiwis disengaged due to low fuel, returning to Ondonga. Balfour and Flg Off Highet claimed one each and shared a third. These were virtual swansongs for both Nos 15 and 18 Sqns, which were replaced in the northern Solomons by Nos 14 and 16 Sqns, returning for their second tours.

RABAUL

Although fighting continued on Bougainville, the development of airfields around Torokina put the enemy fortress at Rabaul within range. This was regarded as too difficult a target to invade and neutralise by direct assault, so it was decided that it would be isolated and allowed to 'wither on the vine'.

In a pointer to the future, on 11 December the New Zealand Kittyhawks flew their first fighter-bomber sorties, although there was still much hard air fighting ahead.

The Americans had not initially planned to use P-40s for operations over Rabaul, as the type was considered outmoded for air-to-air fighting. However, the New Zealanders were involved in the first sweep, and so the aircraft were kept on.

This mission, by some 80 aircraft, came on 17 December, Wg Cdr Trevor Freeman (in NZ3153) leading 24 Kittyhawks in two formations, one by himself and the other by Sqn Ldr Arkwright, staging via Bougainville. At first no enemy fighters were seen, but after about 30 minutes four Zeros bounced the Kittyhawks, hitting one in the starboard wing. A Zero broke up under the return fire of Sgt Mills of No 16 Sqn.

More Zeros were then spotted, with Freeman leading a section down. He destroyed one, but in a fierce fight he was seen to go down trailing smoke and no trace of him was found. His No 2 shot down another, although he was hit in the wing by a cannon shell, while Flt Lt 'Van' Vanderpump dived on eight Zeros over the harbour and destroyed No 16 Sqn's third, sending the Zero crashing into the foot of Mount Towanumbatir. It turned out later that Vanderpump's No 2 had been shot down.

The second formation then arrived, but No 14 Sqn's only claim, and its last of the war, was a Zero downed in flames. Following Freeman's loss, Sqn Ldr Nelson then assumed temporary command of the wing until Wg Cdr Charles Nichols (who had around six victories) arrived in early 1944.

After this operation No 14 Sqn returned to Espiritu Santo, being replaced by Guy Newton's No 17 Sqn. It was quickly into action, with Newton leading a formation on a bomber escort on the 19th – Vanderpump led the No 16 Sqn element. At first no fighters were encountered, but as the raid departed four Zeros dived on the rear formation and one was hit by several bursts. It rolled onto its back and dived into the ground.

The climax for the New Zealand Fighter Wing in the operations against Rabaul occurred during a sweep on Christmas Eve when it claimed its biggest success of the campaign. Twenty-four Kittyhawks and a similar number of US fighters set out, and on approaching the Gazelle Peninsula the dust of scrambling Japanese fighters, estimated as two groups of 20, could be clearly seen. Sqn Ldr Arkwright led No 16 Sqn down on one group while Sqn Ldr Newton (flying NZ3136) led No 17 Sqn against the other. Newton later recounted the fight;

'On the way in we could see clouds of dust rising off the Tobera strip. When we were about five miles south-east of Praed Point two groups of bandits, with more than 20 aircraft in each, were seen climbing up on our port side. The further group was a little higher than the nearer group. Sqn Ldr Arkwright led No 16 Sqn down on the nearer group, and I went down on the further group, both of us saying on the R/T that we were going to attack.

'I picked a "Zeke" near the front of the very loose formation and opened fire at 300 yards in a stern quarter attack, continuing firing as I followed the fighter round in a turn until I was dead astern. The "Zeke" exploded at the wing roots and started to burn, with bits of the aircraft flying off. He tumbled over and went down in flames.

'I saw many aircraft shot down by the squadron in this initial attack. I pulled round to the left, looking for another target. The sky was full of P-40s and bandits milling round. I saw a "Zeke" on my left at the same level doing a left-hand turn. I turned, closing in astern, and fired a



The top-scoring New Zealander in the Solomon Islands with five confirmed and one probable was Sqn Ldr Guy Newton DFC, who was also OC No 17 Sqn. Although forced to bail out on his blazing P-40 upon making his combat debut over 'the Slot', he was duly rescued and went on to make his first claim soon afterwards. His remaining kills came during two combats on No 17 Sqn's next tour, when the unit was heavily involved in the fighting over Rabaul (Author's collection)

P-40K Kittyhawks (NZ3121/K nearest and NZ3126/C) are worked by No 4 Servicing Unit, these aircraft being flown by No 17 Sqn from Ondonga, New Georgia, in early 1944. No 17 Sqn's CO during this tour was Sqn Ldr Guy Newton who, on 9 January – about the time this photo was taken – was flying NZ3126/C when he became an ace (RNZAF)



one-second burst at 250-300 yards. He did a complete flick roll to the left and when he pulled up I was still astern at 200 yards. I fired a two- to three-second burst and got hits all round the fuselage. He fell off in a lazy roll to the right and went straight down, apparently out of control.

'I then found another "Zeke" milling around in the sky where about 12 P-40s were mixing with a mass of "Zekes". We were now down to about 12,000 ft. I turned in towards him and as he started a gentle turn to the left. I closed right in to 300 yards astern and fired a short burst. He flick-rolled to the left, and as he straightened up I fired a long burst from dead astern. He fell away in a lazy roll to the right and then went down in a vertical dive.

'I rolled behind him and fired short bursts as he came into my sights. I observed my tracer going into the fuselage. I broke away at low level as I saw the "Zeke" go into the sea. As I was following him down I saw another "Zeke" go into the sea. This could have been the one I had engaged previously and left in an uncontrolled dive.

'I started to regain altitude and was set on by six "Zekes". I fired several bursts haphazardly at them, but they hemmed me in and I broke violently down again. At full throttle I could not shake off some of the "Zekes", so I went right down to the water and headed for the Duke of York Islands. I found another P-40 in the same predicament, so we scissored together.

'As the "Zekes" broke away we turned back towards the fight. I saw four P-40s making out to the rally point – Cape St George – and as the fight seemed to be working out from Rabaul, we again turned towards the rally point and were immediately pounced upon from above by six to eight "Zekes". We used full power and overtook the P-40s ahead of us. I saw a P-40 low down over the water behind me in the direction of Rabaul, so I turned back and started to scissor with him. After the first scissor he was shot down by a "Zeke". His aircraft trailed smoke and went into the sea ten miles north-west from Cape St George. I went right down to the water

at full throttle with two "Zekes" behind shooting. I skidded violently and most of the tracer went over my head into the sea. The "Zekes" broke off five miles from Cape St George, where I joined five or six P-40s and set course for Torokina. We pancaked there at 1300 hrs.'

As Newton so vividly described, the wing became embroiled in a wild *melée* over the Gazelle Peninsula and out over St George's Channel as the battle became a series of confused individual combats. This dogfight against the odds had been highly successful, but at a cost. Seven Kittyhawks had gone down, although two pilots were rescued, one in St George's Channel by an air sea rescue 'Dumbo' flying boat after six hours in the water. However, two pilots from No 16 Sqn and three from No 17 Sqn were lost.

The credit side, however, revealed a triumph for the wing, with 12 enemy fighters confirmed destroyed and six probables. No 16 Sqn claimed three kills and two probables, but the lion's share went to No 17 Sqn. Newton was credited with two and a probable, as was Flg Off Geoff Highet, while Flg Off Jones also had two destroyed, with single claims going to five other pilots.

The story for the RNZAF did not end there, as a Ventura from No 1 Sqn, providing air-sea rescue cover for the Christmas Eve sweep, was attacked by a swarm of Zeros, and in an epic fight against the odds Flg Off Ayson's crew destroyed three and claimed two probables. Three of this gallant crew were subsequently decorated.

FINAL VICTORIES

No 17 Sqn soon sent a detachment to one of the new airfields at Torokina, on Bougainville, and in early January 1944 the rest of the squadron moved there. They were joined by No 15 Sqn, which had returned for a third tour, now led by Sqn Ldr Johnny Gibson. Another ace from the UK, Flt Lt Roy Bush, was flight commander. No 16 Sqn, meanwhile, returned south for a rest.

Close cover escort to B-24, SBD Dauntless and TBM Avenger raids on airfield targets around Rabaul was the regular task for the New Zealanders, while the higher-flying US P-38s, P-47s and Corsairs conducted the more productive sweeps.

Nonetheless, air combat opportunities did present themselves, the wing flying 76 sorties in the early part of the month and No 15 Sqn claiming the first aerial kill of the new tour when a Zero was downed into Simpson Harbour on 4 January.

No 17 Sqn opened its account for 1944 during an escort mission flown three days later, two Zeros being shot down. One of these fell to Flg Off Geoff Highet to take his final tally to 3.5 confirmed and one probable.

On the 9th Zeros intercepted an Avenger strike escorted by No 17 Sqn. In bitter fighting three Japanese fighters fell, including two to CO Guy Newton, taking him past the magic five for ace status. With one probable, he was the highest scoring RNZAF pilot of the South Pacific theatre. This fight, however, cost the squadron two pilots, for although badly mauled the enemy defenders of Rabaul still fought with fanatical determination.

For the remainder of the month the almost daily escorts led to further claims, with No 17 Sqn shooting down its 19th, and last, Japanese aircraft on the 20th. The unit was relieved two days later.

P-40N Kittyhawk IV NZ3220 was named *Gloria LYONS* after a New Zealand schoolgirl. It was flown by pilots of No 18 Sqn, and displays 2.5 Japanese flags and a bomb log, and may thus have been the aircraft flown by Flg Off C D A Highet, who was killed in action in early 1944 (Don Noble)



No 15 Sqn was still scoring steadily, however, with one of the great RNZAF characters, Flt Lt J J de Willimoff, destroying a Zero while escorting a B-25 raid on the 22nd for his second kill. The following day, during an Avenger escort, Sqn Ldr Gibson shot down a Zero for his 13th victory. This was his only success against the Japanese.

Meanwhile, No 18 Sqn had arrived for a new tour with a number of successful pilots from previous Pacific tours amongst its ranks, including the CO, Sqn Ldr John Oldfield, with three kills, Flt Lt 'Jimmy' Balfour with 3.5 and Flt Lt C D A Highet with 2.5 and a probable. Sadly, the latter did not add to his score, as he was one of two pilots lost over Cape Gazelle during a B-25 escort on the 27th, with only one Zero claimed in return.

By now the RNZAF's 100th kill in the Solomons was rapidly approaching, and the Fighter Wing's 'ton' was also close. The honour of the RNZAF's 100th (and No 15 Sqn's last) victory fell on 28 January to Flg Off Hilliard Boucher, a No 18 Sqn pilot who made the last claim of the month by destroying a Zero on the 29th. However, the unit then went through a bad patch, losing two aircraft on 5 February and another on the 9th.

Four days later the CO led the escort for an Avenger raid on Vunakanau airfield, near Rabaul. One of the Avengers was damaged and, true to their reputation, some of the Kiwi Kittyhawks stayed to cover it. They were attacked by more than 20 Zeros, and in a fierce scrap Flg Off Souter (in NZ3137) fell, thus becoming the last New Zealand fighter pilot lost in air combat in the theatre. However, 'Jimmy' Balfour (flying NZ3187) downed a Zero for his fifth victory, making him the final Commonwealth P-40 ace of the war. His CO, John Oldfield, destroyed another for his fourth kill. Frustratingly, Oldfield's was the 99th, and final, claim for the RNZAF Fighter Wing in the Pacific – he missed out on ace status and the wing missed its 'ton'.

Two days later New Zealand troops landed on Green Island under cover from the wing and US aircraft. The one brief attack by enemy



dive-bombers was driven off by the Americans. Rabaul was isolated, and following the virtual destruction of Japanese air strength in New Britain, the Bismarcks and the Solomons, Allied air attacks continued to hit at ground targets.

The last elements of the shattered Japanese air power – about 70 aircraft – were evacuated on 20 February 1944. Thereafter, the RNZAF Kittyhawks, and the F4U/FLG-1 Corsairs which started to replace them from May, had no further chance of air combat, and were employed exclusively on fighter-bomber duties over Rabaul and Bougainville until the end of the war.

A large number of pilots had made claims in the South Pacific, but only three had five or more successes – Fiskin, Balfour and Newton – while Oldfield and Rayner each claimed four and Herrick had two victories and two shared. Established aces Gibson and Spurdle also modestly increased their scores whilst completing tours in the area.

However, perhaps the last word should be from the man who made the final RNZAF Kittyhawk claim, Sqn Ldr John Oldfield DFC. After his return to New Zealand following his third combat tour in the islands, he said;

'Rabaul had been battered from a Japanese stronghold to rubble and dust in six weeks. Kittyhawks under my command were turned into fighter-bombers over this area, for it was no longer necessary for them to escort bombers on their missions – enemy fighter interception had vanished.'



Strapped in, two No 18 Sqn pilots await the signal to fire up their P-40N Kittyhawk IVs at Ondonga, New Georgia. The crushed coral taxiways at this jungle strip are typical of those found at the numerous bases that proliferated throughout the Pacific. Behind the Kittyhawks is a US Marine Corps F4U-1 Corsair – a type that No 18 Sqn would later fly. This unit made the RNZAF's final fighter claims in the South Pacific during this particular tour (RNZAF)

During No 14 Sqn's first combat tour, one of its most successful pilots was Flt Lt John Oldfield, who was credited with three Zeros destroyed. After returning to New Zealand, he became the first CO of No 18 Sqn, which he led up to the Solomon Islands in early 1944. On 13 February he shot down a Zero during an escort to Rabaul to claim the RNZAF's 99th, and final, fighter claim in the Solomons. Frustratingly, the wing's century and Oldfield's fifth never came (RNZAF)

THE ALEUTIAN CAMPAIGN

In early June 1942, at the height of their power in the Pacific, Japanese forces bombed the US base at Dutch Harbour and also seized the small islands of Kiska and Attu at the very tip of the bleak and inhospitable Aleutian Islands chain, which formed part of the US territory of Alaska. The potential threat, as well as the political affront of having the Japanese on US soil, led to immediate American efforts to expel the enemy.

With American forces already stretched in the Western Pacific, the Canadians were asked to help defend Alaska. On 2 June the HQ of X Wing RCAF formed at Elmendorf, just outside Anchorage, under the control of the US Alaskan Command, and at first the wing controlled two Canadian squadrons, No 8 for bomber-reconnaissance duties and No 111 (with Kittyhawks) for air defence work. No 111 had reformed in the fighter role the previous November under Sqn Ldr Deane Nesbitt DFC, a veteran of the Battle of Britain, and had been based in British Columbia with Kittyhawk Is transferred from deliveries to the RAF.

The Canadian squadrons were sent into mainland Alaska to 'backfill' for USAAF units that had moved forward down the rugged Aleutian Islands chain. On arrival at Elmendorf the CO handed command to Sqn Ldr Kerwen, while Nesbitt was promoted to command Y Wing on Annette Island. The commander of X Wing was Wg Cdr (later Gp Capt) Gordon McGregor, who had been credited with five victories during the Battle of Britain flying Hurricanes with No 1 Sqn RCAF.

Once it had settled in, No 111 Sqn immediately began defensive patrols, keeping aircraft on standby against any Japanese intruders into the Anchorage area. Its first interception came on 1 July, but the 'intruder' turned out to be a friendly Bolingbroke bomber. As a result of McGregor's pressure on the US command, in early July the Canadians were ordered to move 12 aircraft, with 21 pilots and 60 support

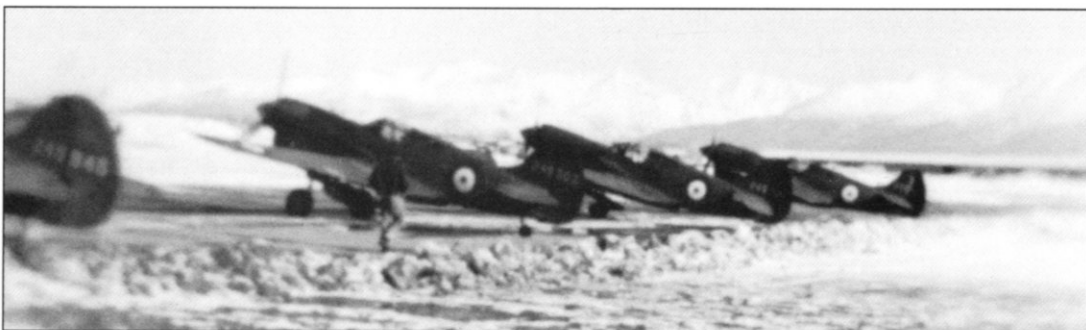
During No 111 Sqn's detachments to the forward operating base at Umnak, in the Aleutian Islands, the RCAF pilots flew USAAF P-40Ks. These retained their US serial numbers and olive drab/neutral grey camouflage, but had RCAF roundels applied over their USAAF stars (Canadian Forces)





Sqn Ldr Ken Boomer, CO of No 111 Sqn RCAF in Alaska, had destroyed a Ju 88 and damaged a Bf 109 whilst flying Spitfires with No 411 'Canadian' Sqn in the UK in 1941. On 25 September 1942 he led the RCAF's first offensive mission on Kiska and engaged a 'Rufe' floatplane fighter, which he shot down in flames. Boomer was subsequently awarded a DFC for this action. He later returned to England, but was killed in action in a Mosquito on 22 October 1944 (Canadian Forces)

The P-40K whose tail is visible on the extreme left of this photograph is 42-45945. This No 111 Sqn machine is thought to be the aircraft flown by unit CO, Sqn Ldr Ken Boomer, on 25 September 1942 when he claimed the only victory for a 'home' based RCAF fighter during World War 2. His wingman, Flg Off P H Gooding, was in 42-45954, which is also visible in this photo (Canadian Forces)



personnel, forward to Umnak, the most advanced base in the Aleutians, and the morale of the eager Canadians soared.

The Aleutians are infamous for being blighted by some of the worst flying weather in the world, and during the transit from Cold Bay to Umnak on 16 July, seven aircraft were caught in a severe storm, and five (AL138LZ-S, AL166/LZ-O, AL201/LZ-H, AK954/LZ-F and AK996) were lost with their pilots, including the CO. Only McGregor and one other pilot got through.

At Umnak, the USAAF's 11th FS, led by Maj John S Chennault,

had a surplus of P-40Ks but was short of pilots, so rather than risk further losses, USAAF fighters were handed over to the Canadians, who initially formed an all-RCAF 'F' Flight within the unit. To ensure they remained distinct, however, the Canadians eventually overpainted the US stars with RCAF roundels, although the aircraft retained their USAAF serials.

The new CO of No 111 Sqn was Sqn Ldr Ken Boomer, who also had combat experience from the UK – he arrived, along with four other pilots, on 20 August. While flying Spitfires with No 411 'Canadian' Sqn in the UK in 1941, Boomer had damaged a Bf 109 on 27 September and shot down a Ju 88 in flames off the Lincolnshire coast on 7 November.

To provide air cover over its captured territory, the Imperial Japanese Navy had moved in seaplane tenders carrying A6M2-N 'Rufe' floatplane fighters on 5 July. These had immediately commenced patrols over Kiska, and on 5 August the unit was designated the 5th *Kokutai*. At Umnak, meanwhile, the Canadians again found themselves on defensive duties, but on 22 August they were brought up to full strength with the transfer of nine P-40Ks.

On 10 September the new US base at Adak opened, putting the enemy bases just within range of the P-40. Raids began on the 14th, and over the next week reinforcements, including more Canadians, arrived from Umnak. Boomer was soon chafing to get his men onto an offensive mission, and on the 25th he was granted his wish. Nine B-24 Liberators, with a heavy fighter escort of 12 P-39s and 20 P-40s, flew a raid on Kiska.

P-40s were flown by Boomer (believed to have been in 42-45945), Flg Offs Gohl and Lynch and Plt Off Gooding (in 42-45954).

After the B-24s had completed their bombing attack, the fighters then dived down and strafed gun emplacements and naval craft. Sent up to oppose them were two 'Rufe' floatplanes of the 5th *Kokutai*, flown by Lt Yamada and his (unidentified) wingman. The Canadian quartet flew in low towards the north head of Kiska harbour, where they struck at gun positions as well as the main Japanese camp and a radar installation. As they swung round for a second pass, they met the two floatplanes, one (believed to have been Yamada's) quickly getting on to the tail of an 11th FS P-40. The 'Rufe' was then attacked in turn by Boomer, who pulled up and opened fire, as he later described;

'I climbed to a stall practically and pulled right up under him. I just poured it into him from underneath. He flamed up and went down, and the Japanese pilot jumped just before it hit the sea.'

Maj Chennault shot down the second 'Rufe' minutes later.

The Canadian section then joined some US pilots in strafing a surfaced enemy submarine until their ammunition was spent. Boomer added;

'We poured so much 0.50-calibre stuff onto the decks that it glowed red – hit and killed three gun crews. The boys just waited their turn and came down at it.'

With few Japanese aircraft in the area, Ken Boomer's victory was a rare event. Indeed his was the only kill by the RCAF over North America, and was also to be the only air combat for the 'home-based' RCAF! Boomer was awarded an immediate DFC, and the citation read;

'This officer is in command of a fighter squadron on detached operations in Alaska. Inspired by his unflagging zeal and devotion to duty, his squadron has maintained a consistently high standard of efficiency under difficult and trying conditions. He has displayed great qualities of courage and determination in seeking out the enemy, and his flying skill has been responsible for the excellent work done by his squadron in action against the enemy. He was the first RCAF pilot (in this theatre – author) to make direct contact with the enemy, and in doing so gave an exceptionally good account of himself. His services on fighter operations have been invaluable.'

All four Canadian pilots were awarded the US Air Medal. Boomer later returned to England to fly Mosquito intruder missions with No 418 'Canadian' Sqn, but was lost on operations on 22 October 1944.

The Canadians did not participate in any further offensive missions during 1942, and by mid-October No 111 Sqn had moved back to Kodiak. This unit, and No 14 Sqn which moved up in 1943, flew occasional offensive missions until the final Japanese withdrawal from Kiska, but no more enemy aircraft were encountered.

CHINESE SOIRÉE

Although no Commonwealth units or personnel flew and claimed victories over China, one officer with RAF connections did manage to see combat in this theatre. Sqn Ldr Witold Urbanowicz, a Polish exile who had escaped from his homeland, flew with RAF and Polish squadrons throughout the Battle of Britain, and had claims for around 16 destroyed. He subsequently flew in combat over China with the USAAF for a time.



Exiled Polish pilot Sqd Ldr Witold Urbanowicz, who flew during the Battle of Britain, was sent by the Poles to the US to serve in its embassy in Washington DC in 1942. Late the following year he was attached to the USAAF in China, where he flew P-40s with the 23rd F/G. He is flanked here by Maj Spritzler (left) and Capt Cline shortly before his departure back to the UK in December 1943 (via W Matusiak)

In late 1942 Urbanowicz was serving in a liaison capacity at the Polish Embassy in Washington DC when he was invited by Gen Claire Chennault (father of Maj Chennault who fought in the Aleutians) to visit the Fourteenth Air Force in China on a familiarisation mission.

It was not until 23 October 1943 that Urbanowicz finally flew his first mission with the 23rd FG's 16th FS, and later the 74th FS, in the P-40K. Most of his time was spent with the 75th FS, stationed at Kunming. The squadron's aircraft were decorated with sharks mouths on the nose, and many carried individual names – one known to have been flown by the Pole was called *THE Deacon/SAD SACK*.

He regularly flew with the unit, completing about 12 missions, and is credited by a US Army document with around nine enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground. Although mainly performing ground support sorties for the Chinese Army, he also became involved in occasional air combats, including one during a

long reconnaissance mission while flying as wingman for 23rd FLG CO, and 15.25-kill ace, Maj Tex Hill. Urbanowicz later recounted;

'We arrived over Hong Kong, and directly over the centre of the city we were attacked by two Zeros. I made a turn and got one of the planes into my gunsight, but the Japanese pilot proved to be a master in combat. He not only got out of my gunsight, but even tried to get on my tail. From this position any fighter is defenceless, except for the pilot's talents – in this case the manoeuvrability of the machine was decisive. The Japanese pilot managed to place himself in a good position to fire a couple of times. I slipped out. But when I, at last, caught the silhouette of his aeroplane from behind in my gunsight, he panicked and started to try to shake me off his tail, to get rid of the danger of awaiting death.

'Tex disappeared somewhere with his Yellows. I was left alone. One of us has to die – the Japanese or me. I preferred it to be him. To me, these few minutes felt like hours. We fought just above the Hong Kong roofs – a crowd of people stood and watched our combat with great interest. Rickshaws stopped, passengers had a duty-free show. But we both fought to save our lives.

'I had to shoot him down. I pulled the stick and kept steering with my leg, to keep the horizon visible over my engine panel (I was in a sharp turn). The Japanese pilot had flown too fast and was unable to turn as sharply as me. He ought to have prevented that, but he realised this too



late. And now he came directly into my gunsight. At a distance of 50 metres behind him, I pressed the firing button.

'My guns remained silent. I saw darkness in my eyes and felt hot all over my body, just like if I had fallen into boiling water. "Oh, bloody hell, the guns jammed!" I exclaimed loudly. I pressed the firing button again – and again there was nothing. I was absolutely furious. I followed the Japanese, but I couldn't shoot him down. There was no exit. But the Japanese acted very nervous, feeling that this was the last moment of his life.

'Suddenly he made a fast barrel roll, and in this moment opened his left gear. The instruments had to show this to him. He thought his plane was hit. Then, at full throttle, he went down towards the rice fields. I kept following him with jammed guns. I had him exactly in the centre of my gun sight. Only one shell, damn, only one!

'The Japanese pilot lost his last nerves. He didn't know that my guns were jammed. He only knew one thing – death was hanging over him.

'Now he followed the instinct of all ground-bound animals – he escaped downwards, lowered his landing gear and attempted to land. He must have been crazy. At high speed he slammed into the ground, the aeroplane crashing and exploded in fire.'

On 11 December Urbanowicz engaged a returning Japanese formation near Nanchang, and in the ensuing fight downed two fighters, which he claimed as Zeros but were more likely Ki-43s. These were his final kills.

That he was highly regarded is evident from another 75th FS ace, 2Lt Donald Lopez, who said of Urbanowicz;

'I knew Maj Urbanowicz fairly well in China, and I went on a number of the missions he flew on. He was very highly regarded by the squadron members, both as a man and as an outstanding fighter pilot, and was amazed at how much of what occurred in an air battle he was able to report compared with what the rest of us saw.'

On 15 December 1943 Urbanowicz ended his short 'familiarisation' tour of duty in China and was sent to Britain.

Recorded by Witold Urbanowicz as 'his' aircraft, this P-40K, named *THE Deacon/SAD SACK*, was usually flown by a USAAF pilot and was probably used by the Pole on occasions. It belonged to the 75th FS, with whom Urbanowicz made his final combat claims of the war (Koniarek archive)

THE MOHAWK

As France was succumbing to the German *blitzkrieg* in the summer of 1940, some Hawk 75 A-1, A-2 and A-3 types were evacuated to England. About 227 ex-French Hawks were taken on to RAF strength and renamed the Mohawk, with mark numbers equating to the sub-series number – the A-1 became the Mohawk I, A-2 the Mk II, A-3 the Mk III, and the Cyclone-engined A-4 the Mk IV. Meanwhile, large numbers of newer Hawk 75 A-4s also began arriving from the US.

SOUTH AFRICAN DEBUT

In early 1941 a batch of Mohawks was transferred to the South African Air Force, which used them mainly as fighter trainers for units working up. One such unit was No 4 Sqn which worked up on them before moving to the desert. It formed on 2 May, and among its pilots was Capt Andrew Bosman, who was later to be successful on the P-40. Other squadrons had trained with them in the Union itself, and some carried out patrols during early 1942 against a possible Japanese carrier attack.

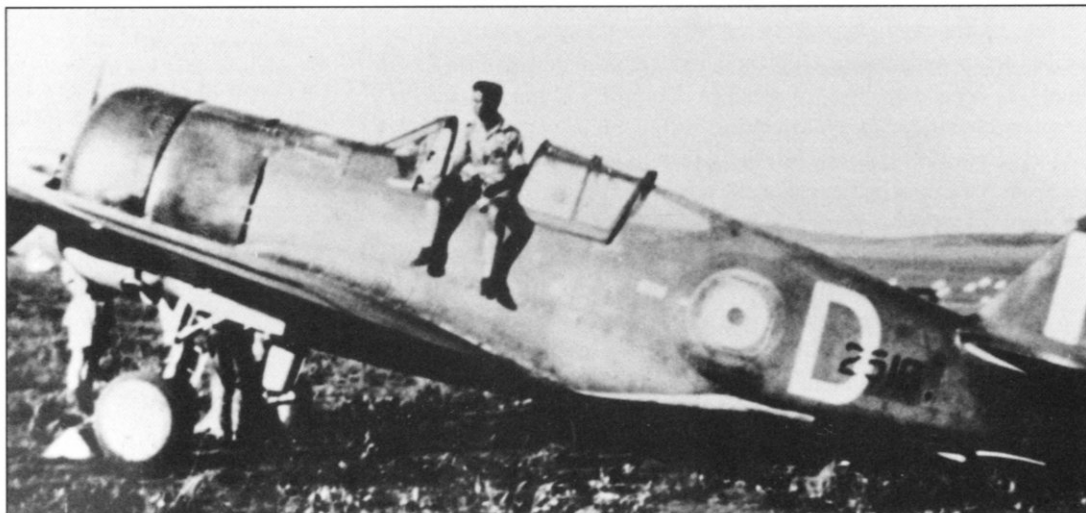
However, in Ethiopia the SAAF had been fighting a campaign against the Italians, and its aged equipment needed replacing. No 3 Sqn began re-equipping, and on 1 September 1941 'B' Flight (known until late October as No 41 Sqn Fighter Detachment) received its first Mohawks. By this stage the East African campaign was all but over, and in desperation the Italians were flying re-supply sorties into Ethiopia through Djibouti, in Vichy-held French Somaliland. On 16 September three Mohawks were ordered from Nairobi to the border town of Aiscia to intercept the Italians, and they were there by the 18th. The flight's new home was described by Capt Jack Parsonson as 'a desert with dry river beds and an odd moon-like landscape unrelieved by any vegetation'.

The following morning two unidentified aircraft were spotted, but they escaped back to Djibouti. On the 21st two line patrols were flown by

Mohawk IV 2516/D of No 3 Sqn SAAF is believed to have been one of the aircraft detached for action against the Vichy French at Djibouti, where it is thought to have been flown by Capt Jack Parsonson on several occasions (A Jarlski)



The only enemy aircraft destroyed by a Mohawk in Africa was the Savoia S.75 strafed on the ground at Djibouti by Capt Jack Parsonson. He later flew Kittyhawks with Nos 2 and 5 Sqns SAAF in 1942-43, and attained ace status over Tunisia in April 1943. A respected leader, he was shot down attacking a motor-torpedo boat soon afterwards and spent the rest of the war as a PoW (via C F Shores)



Parsonson and his new CO, Capt Snyman, and two days later permission was given to attack the Italians on 'neutral' Vichy territory if necessary.

Patrols along the border continued, and on 4 October the detachment was alerted that it would find a Savoia transport at Djibouti. Parsonson quickly left to investigate, but in spite of his swift reaction nothing was spotted. The following morning, in Mohawk IV 2522 (formerly BJ450), Parsonson flew another abortive sortie and returned to Aiscia. After refuelling, he took off again, and this time he located a Savoia S.75 on the airfield at Djibouti. He remembers:

'I approached from 10,000 ft, and there stood the Savoia in front of one of the hangars. I decided to attack from the landward side and, after destroying it, to make my way out to sea. This was my first attack on anything, and I was very excited. I circled and put my nose down in a steep dive and made a careful attack. The aircraft loomed large in the sights and I fired a long burst, flashed over it and out to sea. I looked back and saw that it was undamaged. I turned for another attack, feeling this time I must get it. Again it loomed large in my sights as I pressed the trigger – I was very low indeed. As I flashed over it there was "whoomph" and it burst into flames. I kept low over the town and turned for home feeling wonderfully elated.'

This was the only aircraft destroyed by a Mohawk in Africa.

Patrols during the coming days were uneventful, and soon Parsonson left for Kenya with a severe ear infection. During a patrol on 28 October two Vichy French Potez 63 aircraft were spotted taking off but were not caught. Two weeks later most of No 3 Sqn left for South Africa following the Italian surrender, the Mohawks having flown a number of ground attack sorties. What was now 'B' Flight was to follow when Djibouti fell.

The small Mohawk flight continued patrols, and on 11 December Lt Gazzard had just taken off when a Potez 63 from Djibouti dived over Aiscia. Gazzard chased it and was fired on by the Potez's rear gunner. The Mohawk opened fire and smoke was seen coming from the intruder's port engine before he dived for safety into cloud. Soon, the flight rejoined the rest of No 3 Sqn back home. Jack Parsonson was later credited with five kills in the desert.

INDIAN SKIES

To improve the air defences in India in February 1941, No 5 Sqn, which was flying Audax biplanes, was re-designated as a fighter unit. It was not until 29 December that the first Mohawk was delivered, but by March 1942 it was operational and flying defensive patrols and convoy escorts from its Dum Dum base.

In early April the Japanese made a naval incursion into the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal, where Vice Adm Jisaburo Ozawa's Malaya force created havoc among coastal shipping. On the morning of 6 April a convoy was attacked by three Japanese cruisers and their floatplanes.

Nearby was one of No 5 Sqn's Mohawks, which reported the attack. The squadron scrambled two other aircraft, BS795/QO-W flown by Flt Lt Keith MacEwan and Sgt Derek Wicks in BJ544. MacEwan soon spotted an E8N 'Dave' as it prepared to touch down ahead of the cruiser *Kumano*, and diving to sea level, he fired 600 rounds and reported the Japanese aircraft down in the sea. He was credited with the Mohawk's



Fit Lt Keith MacEwan surveys the bullet-ridden rear fuselage of his Mohawk at Dinjan after a strike on Myitkyina on 8 July 1942, where No 5 Sqn strafed the barracks and airstrip. It was whilst flying this aircraft on 6 April that MacEwan was credited with the RAF's first Mohawk victory when he attacked the E8N 'Dave' floatplane from the cruiser *Kumano* in the Bay of Bengal (A K MacEwan)

first victory in RAF colours. He later recalled;

'Going down to ten feet and flying between two ships, I pumped 600 rounds into a "Dave" floatplane, and I kept low until out of range, and I then climbed away. The floatplane was low on the water and possibly sinking.'

As it happened it had touched down on the water damaged and was recovered, but the RAF's Mohawks had tasted action. No 5 Sqn later sent a detachment to Tezpur, and amongst the pilots deployed was a young sergeant called Stuart Garnett, who recalled the Mohawk's first air combat kill;

'The detachment provided escorts to Dakotas flying supplies

into Imphal, and "Rhubarbs" were also flown over the River Chindwin. On 20 August my section of two Mohawks was returning from Mawlaik at a height of 6000 ft when we sighted a single-engined aircraft at "two o'clock down", flying along the river in the opposite direction. The red roundels on wings and fuselage were plainly visible. Our section continued on course until the Japanese aircraft was at a "five o'clock low" position, and then we made a 180-degree descending turn to the right, straightening out into a shallow power dive, but rapidly closing the distance on the target, the No 2 providing top cover. At maybe 30 yards I opened and held fire. Tracer hits were seen on the wing roots of what appeared to be an Army 97 (in fact a Ki 27 "Nate" - author) which immediately pulled in a sharp left-hand climbing turn.

'I pulled my Mohawk into a right-hand climbing turn, and in the process of completing a 360-degree turn, the enemy was seen to be going down in an increasingly steep dive with black smoke pouring back from the engine. Then a parachute streamed back from the cockpit. After I saw the aircraft hit the ground and the parachute descending towards the jungle, we turned on to a northerly course for Tezpur.'

Garnett remembered the Mohawk as 'a very nice aeroplane to fly with no vices and a comfortable cockpit. The manoeuvrability was good, and it was found that if the speed was kept up to 180-200 mph, the aircraft could turn well with the 01 "Oscars". A high-speed stall was practically unknown'.

A second unit (No 155 Sqn) received its first Mohawks at St Thomas Mount, Madras, in August 1942, although it was to be some time before it was operational. It was commanded by Sqn Ldr 'Dimsie' Stones, who had seven victories and five shared in Hurricanes from combat in France and southern England in 1940 and Malta in 1941. No 155 also had another ace within its ranks in the form of Sgt Henry Nicholls, who had six confirmed victories in Hurricanes from the desperate fighting against the Japanese in Malaya, from where he had been lucky to escape. Stones



left the squadron in November, but Nichols was to complete 18 months' service flying the Mohawk with No 155 Sqn.

Meanwhile, No 5 Sqn continued operations, and in October moved to Bengal for patrols over the Arakan area. On the 7th ten Mohawks led by the CO, Sqn Ldr Bill Pitt-Brown, escorted Blenheims in an attack on Akyab, and one pilot downed a Ki-48 'Lily'. Soon afterwards No 155 moved to Alipore, in Calcutta, and on the 30th flew its first offensive sortie. At the same time Sqn Ldr Pitt-Brown became the wing leader of No 169 Wing, for which he had his own Mohawk (BS790), which carried his initials 'WPB'.

Fierce action over Arakan came on 10 November. First No 155 – whose CO was Sqn Ldr C G StD Jefferies, a former Malta ace – escorted Blenheims to Akyab docks and ran into Ki-43 'Oscars' of the elite 64th *Sentai*. In the dogfight two Mohawks were lost, but two 'Oscars' also fell. These were No 155's first air combat claims.

Later that day the Blenheims attacked Akyab again, the escort provided by No 5's Mohawks led by the wing leader, Sqn Ldr Pitt-Brown. They too encountered 'Oscars', and in a confused fight two enemy fighters were destroyed, one by Pitt-Brown. His radio was not working, so he was unable to control the fight, but seeing a group of 'Oscars' at 9000 ft, he attacked alone, hitting one which was crash-landed at Akyab by its dying pilot. It had been a successful engagement for the Mohawk wing. The pilots had also discovered something important – their little aircraft could turn inside the highly manoeuvrable 'Oscars'.

To support the limited offensive down the Arakan peninsula, further sweeps continued, with the push leading to a marked increase in Japanese air activity. In another fight, on 19 January, No 5 Sqn destroyed an 'Oscar' that had collided with a Mohawk, the latter fighter returning safely minus some four feet of wingtip! In order to be closer to the action, No 5 Sqn



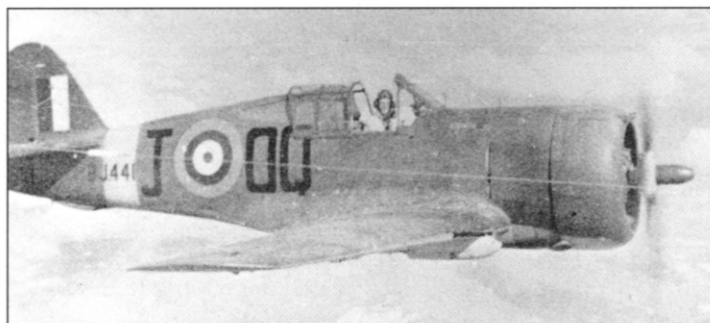
In November 1942 Nos 5 and 155 Sqn were formed into No 169 Wing, with Sqn Ldr Bill Pitt-Brown as wing leader. He successfully led the wing flying this aircraft (BS790), and on 10 November 1942 he shot down a Ki-43 in the biggest combat between Mohawks and the JAAF. As a wing leader Pitt-Brown was able to carry his initials on his aircraft, so WPB adorned the fuselage and the initials PB also appeared on the nose in white. Interestingly, the red portion of the fuselage roundel on this machine has been substantially reduced (W H Pitt-Brown)

The only ace to make an air-to-air claim on the Mohawk was No 155 Sqn's CO, Sqn Ldr 'Porky' Jefferies, who had at least four and two shared victories from his service in the UK and Malta flying Hurricanes. His sole Japanese claim – a Ki-43 – was made flying the Mohawk (B Cull)



Mohawk BB928/Z was the personal aircraft of Sqn Ldr 'Porky' Jefferies DFC of No 155 Sqn in January 1943. Like other squadron aircraft, it has personal nose art – in this case a fire-breathing Welsh dragon above the inscription *Cymru am Byth*. What makes this aircraft unique is that it is the only Mohawk known to have carried a 'scoreboard'. Jefferies had claims against both the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica, and appears to have recorded both his confirmed and probable claims. His sole Japanese claim, variously noted as confirmed and probable, is also recorded. He was the only ace to make an air-to-air claim with the Mohawk (Paul Sortehaug via B Cull)

Mohawk IV BJ441/OQ-J of No 5 Sqn patrols over the mighty Brahmaputra River from Agartala in October 1942, when the unit was charged with defending the port city of Calcutta. The fighter is camouflaged in the standard dark green/dark earth/sky colours of the period, although its code letters are black rather than sky. BJ441 is being flown by Sgt Derek Wicks who on 12 February 1943 downed a Ki-43, which was No 5 Sqn's final kill with the Mohawk (D Wicks)



moved to a beach strip code-named 'Hove' in preparation for an operation to disrupt enemy supply routes. However, sightings of the JAAF were rare. No 155 Sqn had also been active, and continued to increase its operational tempo, often in bad weather.

Contact with the enemy came in the final week of January 1943, when on the 28th 19 Mohawks from both units conducted a sweep to Akyab. A solitary 'Oscar' dived

from above and was promptly chased and hit by Sqn Ldr 'Porky' Jefferies, flying BB928/Z. Some sources say it was destroyed, and others credit a probable only, but it was Jefferies' only claim with the Mohawk – in fact he was the only Commonwealth ace to make an air-to-air claim flying one.

The following day Jefferies led his unit north to Imphal to support the Chindit expedition, where it concentrated on ground attacks. No 5 Sqn remained in the south and continued to support the stalled Arakan offensive, the unit's final confirmed kill coming on 12 February, as recounted to the author by Derek Wicks;

'I was a young 18-year-old sergeant pilot at the time, and had led Stu (Sgt Stuart Garnett - author) to cover some PR Hurricanes over Akyab. We had returned to the strip when a call came on the field telephone for us to scramble, with me as "Red 1". We got airborne and the Japs attacked. Stu and I had a ball! We were jumped by four "01s" (Ki-43 "Oscars" - author) right over the airfield. Stu and I had a wizard series of dogfights. I took plenty of hits on my kite – "D" – two in the armour plating, four in the petrol tank, many in the wings and, I thought, the prop. I did get several good squirts at an "01" which went in – confirmed by witnesses on the 'drome – and another damaged. The others were chased off. The whole thing took place well below 3000 ft. My kill was confirmed in writing by Sqn Ldr Hogan, OC No 5 Sqn.'

His victim was Maj Yasumi Yagi of the 64th Sentai, who crashed west of Rathedaung.

The Mohawks continued to find occasional combats, but were used increasingly on ground-attack work. Although No 5 Sqn periodically encountered the enemy in the air, it scored no further victories until re-equipped with Hurricanes in June, leaving just No 155 Sqn with the radial-engined Curtiss. No 5's final Mohawk score was seven destroyed, seven probables and 11 damaged.

No 155 Sqn continued to operate from Imphal, although the approaching monsoon brought added difficulties. The unit's first encounter with enemy aircraft in the north did not take place until 20 April when ten Mohawks scrambled, and in a series of vicious dogfights

each side lost an aircraft. No 155 Sqn had further inconclusive contact with some Ki-43s the following day in the last encounter with the JAAF for some months. Thereafter, it flew ground attacks, 'Rhubarb' patrols beyond the Chindwin and, from October, pathfinder missions to mark targets for Vengeance dive-bombers.

For the first time in months No 155 Sqn came across the enemy in the air when, at lunchtime on 9 November 1943, 16 Ki-21 'Sally' bombers with six escorting Ki-43s attacked Imphal. Flg Off Tony Dunford (in AR677/V), with Flg Off Edwards as his wingman, scrambled and headed north. Dunford takes up the story;

'Ten miles east of Palel I saw four radial-engined aircraft and assumed them to be Mohawks. Approaching, I saw them break, which indicated that they were enemy. I was about 4000 ft above them. One turned to starboard and I identified it as an "01". I called to my No 2, "Look out – 'nine o'clock' – going in now".

'I dived onto the "01", giving him a three-second deflection burst from the quarter. He then dived vertically and I followed him. He soon pulled out and I straightened and came up astern of him at about 500 yards. I gave full throttle but was overtaking him only slowly. I opened fire with a six-second burst at about 300 yards, observing the de Wilde ammunition striking all over his wings.

'He took no evasive action and I gave him another seven to nine seconds from a fine quarter, following which he momentarily straightened up, then turned on his back and dived vertically with smoke streaming from his engine. I looked around, and seeing no aircraft following me, I followed him down but found my guns empty. Flg Off Bishop (in BS798/B - author) confirms seeing the '01' crash into the ground and explode after diving away from me. I therefore claim the destruction of that aircraft.'

His victim crashed north-east of Palel, where it was later found. Dunford received a DFC for his part in the action – the last time the Mohawk encountered the Japanese in the air. No 155 Sqn continued for a while on its valuable ground support work with its increasingly weary Mohawks until they were withdrawn. On 6 January 1944 the little Curtisses were flown to Kanchrapara for disposal and the squadron re-equipped with the superb Spitfire VIII.

These Mohawks of No 155 Sqn (BS798/B, BT470/F and AR691) formed in August 1943 near Agartala, shortly before moving north to Imphal. They are camouflaged in dark earth and dark green with medium sea grey undersides and interim yellow-outlined blue/white roundels. All have yellow wingtips for recognition. The nearest aircraft (BS798/B) was flown by Flg Off Harry Bishop in the Mohawks' final air battle on 9 November 1943 (Author's collection)



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Commonwealth Tomahawk & Kittyhawk Aces

Name	Service	P-40 Kills	Total Kills	Sqn/s	Theatre
C R Caldwell	RAAF	20+1sh/8/22	27+2sh/11/22	250/112	NA
B Drake	RAF	13+2sh/5/5	20+2sh/6/7	112	NA
J F Edwards	RCAF	12+3sh/8+1sh/9	15+3sh/8+1sh/13	94/260	NA
R J C Whittle	RAAF	11+3sh/2/4	11+3sh/2/4	250/86 RAAF	NA/NG
J L Waddy	RAAF	11+1sh/7/4	15+1sh/7/6	250/260/4 SAAF/80 RAAF	NA/NG
A W Barr	RAAF	11/3/8	11/3/8	3 RAAF	NA
R H M Gibbes	RAAF	10+2sh/5/16	10+2sh/5/16	3 RAAF	NA
N Bowker	RAF	9+1sh/1/1	10+1sh/4/2	112	NA
D W Golding	SAAF	8+3sh/2/2	8+3sh/2/2	4 SAAF	NA
E C Saville	SAAF	8/5/8+1sh	8/5/8+1sh	2 SAAF/112	NA
P StG B Turnbull	RAAF	8/-/1	12/1/2	3 & 75 RAAF	NA/NG
J E Frost	SAAF	7/4/2	14+2sh/4/4	5 SAAF	NA
M S Hards	RAF	7/1/4	7/2/4	250	NA
A C Bosman	SAAF	6+3sh/1/2	8+3sh/1/2	4 & 7 SAAF Wgs	NA
A C Cameron	RAAF	6+1sh/1/7	6+1sh/1/7	3 RAAF	NA
O V Hanbury	RAF	6+1sh/2/1	10+2sh/2/3	260	NA
R M Leu	RAAF	6+1sh/1/1	6+1sh/1/1	112	NA
W S Arthur	RAAF	6/2/5	8/2/6	3 & 75 RAAF	NA/NG
J P Bartle	RAAF	4(6)+1sh/1/2	4(6)+1sh/1/2	112/450	NA
W H A Mailey	RAAF	6/-/5	6/-/5	3 RAAF	NA
C W Cundy	RAAF	5+2sh/1/1	5+2sh/1/1	260	NA
N F Duke	RAF	5+1sh/2/2	27+2sh/1/6	112	NA
D H McBurnie	RAAF	5+1sh/-/1	5+1sh/-/1	450	NA
R R Smith	RAF	5+1sh/-/1	7+1sh/1/2	112	NA
D V D Lacey	SAAF	5/2/5	5/2/5	2 & 5 SAAF	NA
A C Rawlinson	RAAF	5/1/5	8/2/8	3 RAAF	NA
L D Jackson	RAAF	5/1/2	5/1/2	75 RAAF	NG
R H Simes	RAAF	5/1/1	5/1/1	3 RAAF	NA
P G H Newton	RNZAF	5/1/-	5/1/-	17 RNZAF	Sol
R K Wilson	RAAF	5/-/6	5/-/6	3 RAAF	NA
P R Giddy	RAAF	5/-/2	5/-/2	3 RAAF	NA
D W Human	SAAF	5/-/1	5/-/1	2 & 5 SAAF	NA
R H Nitschke	RAAF	5/-/1	5/-/1	250	NA
G B Fiskien	RNZAF	5/-/-	11/1/1	14 RNZAF	Sol
M Powers	RAF/USAAF	5/-/-	7+1sh/-/1	314 FS/324 FG USAAF	NA
G W Garton	RAF	4+2sh/1/1	7+3sh/2/2	250/112	NA
V M L Lindsay	SAAF	4+2sh/-/1	4+2sh/-/1	2 SAAF	NA
G C Atherton	RAAF	4+1sh/2/1	4+1sh/2/1	75 & 80 RAAF	NG
J E Parsonson	SAAF	4+1sh/-/3	4+1sh/-/3	3, 2 & 5 SAAF	EA/NA
C L Botha	SAAF	4+1sh/-/1	4+1sh/-/1	5 SAAF	NA
P Jeffrey	RAAF	4+1sh/-/1	5+1sh/-/1	3 RAAF/234 Wg	NA
R H Balfour	RNZAF	4+1sh/-/-	4+1sh/-/-	18 RNZAF	Sol
H G Burney	RAAF	4+1sh/-/-	4+1sh/-/-	112	NA
G W Troke	RCAF	3+2sh/1/4	5+3sh/1/5	250	NA
V F Curtiss	RAAF	3+2sh/-/-	3+2sh/-/-	3 RAAF	NA
K G Hart	RAF	2+3sh/-/4	5+4sh/1/4	250	NA

APPENDIX B

Aces who made claims on the Tomahawk, Kittyhawk & Mohawk

Name	Service	P-40 Kills	Total Kills	Sqn/s	Theatre
M T Judd	RAF	4/-/2	5?/-/3	250	NA
J E A Williams	RAF	4/-/2	4?/-/2	94/260/45	NA
J L Hewitson	SAAF	4/-/-	5+3sh/-/5	4 & 5 SAAF	NA
G H Ranger	RAF	4/-/-	5+1sh/1/1	250	NA
C J Laubscher	RAF/SAAF	2+2sh/2/3	4+2sh/2/3	2 SAAF	NA
M J Herrick	RNZAF	2+2sh/-/1	6+2sh/-/2	15 RNZAF	Sol
D F Westenra	RAF	3+1sh/1/1	8+3sh/2/4	112	NA
J F Jackson	RAAF	3+1sh/-/-	7+1sh/1/-	3 & 75 RAAF	NA/NG
A E Marshall	RAF	3+1sh/-/-	16+2sh/2/1	250	NA
M C H Barber	RAF/SAAF	3/1/1	3/1/1	250/450 RAAF	NA
J J B Sabourin	RCAF	3/-/3	6+1sh/-/3	112	NA
J H W Saunders	RAAF	3/-/-	6/-/2	3 RAAF	NA
H C Mayers	RAF	3/-/-	11+1sh/3/6	239 Wg	NA
D H Loftus	SAAF	3/-/-	4+1sh/-/-	2 SAAF/7 SAAF Wg	NA
W M Whitamore	RAF	2/2/2	9+1sh/4/11	112	NA
R E Bary	RAF	2/1/1	2+4sh/2/2	250	NA
R L Spurdle	RNZAF	2/-/2	10/2/9	16 RNZAF	Sol
C E Casbolt	RAF	2/-/1	13+1sh/1/3+1sh	250	NA
J C Groves	RAF	2/-/1	6+1sh/2/3	112	NA
D Ibbotson	RAF	2/1/1	11/4/4	112	NA
J E Scouler	RAF	2/-/1	15+1sh/1/4	250	NA
R F Martin	RAF	2/-/1	5+2sh/-/1	250	NA
H F Burton	RAF	2/-/-	2+4sh/1/1+1sh	239 Wg	NA
G H F Plinston	RAF	2/-/-	7+1sh/-/-	3 RAAF/250	NA
W Urbanowicz	RAF	2/-/-	18/1/-	75 FS/23 FG USAAF	China
A Duncan	SAAF	1+1sh/1/-	5+1sh/1/12 (on ground)	5 SAAF	NA
T G Paxton	RAAF	1+1sh/-/-	5+1sh/-/-	250	NA
G H Steege	RAAF	1/-/1	8/5/2	450 & 76 RAAF	NA
R Pare	SAAF	1/-/+1sh	5/-/2sh	5 SAAF	NA
B R Bennetts	SAAF	1/-/-	3+3sh/-/1	2 SAAF	NA
H P Cochrane	RAF	1/-/-	7/2/1	112	NA
J A A Gibson	RAF	1/-/-	12+1sh/1/11	15 RNZAF	Sol
J R Perrin	RAAF	1/-/-	6/1/-	3 & 76 RAAF	NA
C G StG Jefferies	RAF	-/1/- (or 1/-/-?)	4+2sh/3/2	155	Burma
K N T Lee	RAF	1/-/-	7/-/1	260	NA
K W Truscott	RAAF	1/-/-	14/3/3	76 RAAF	NG
L A Wilmot	SAAF	1/-/-	4+1sh/2/-	258 Wg	NA
A H Boyd	RAAF	1sh/-/2	6+1sh/3/3	75 & 76 RAAF	NG
E J Morris	RAF	1sh/1/2	2+5sh/1/3	250	NA
R B Cole	RAF	-/1/4	6?/1/5+1sh	250	NA
N V Glew	RAF	-/1/1	3+3sh/2/6	260	NA

APPENDIX C

Aces who flew but made no claims on the Tomahawk, Kittyhawk & Mohawk

Name	Service	Total Kills	Sqn/s	Theatre
E M Mason	RAF	15+2sh/-/13	94	NA
P G Wykeham-Barnes	RAF	14+3sh/1/2	73	NA
G H Westlake	RAF	9+2sh/1/3	3 RAAF/239 Wg	Italy
D W A Stones	RAF	7+5sh/4+1sh/4+2sh	155	India
R E P Brooker	RAF	8/2/1	14 RNZAF	NZ
D S Gregory	RAF	8/-/-	250	NA
J A S Allen	RAF	7/3/6	77 RAAF	Australia
D S Scott	RAF	6+2sh/-/3	94	NA
J A Walker	RAF	6+1sh/1sh/1	94/112/250	NA
H T Nichols	RAF	6+1sh/1/3	155	India
H T Mitchell	RCAF	6+1sh/-/1	14 RCAF	Aleutians
J N Mackenzie	RNZAF	6/4/2	14 RNZAF	NZ
L S Ford	RCAF	6/-/2+1sh	403 RCAF	UK
C W K Nichols	RAF	2+1sh(poss 6)/-/-	NZ Ftr Wg	Sol
M E S Robinson	SAAF	5+1sh/1/1	11 OTU SAAF	S Africa
G R McGregor	RCAF	5/2/5	X Wg RCAF	Aleutians
G D L Haysom	RAF	5/1/-	260/239 Wg	NA
H H Hills	RCAF	5/1/-	414 RCAF	UK
R D Vanderfield	RAAF	5/1/-	76 RAAF	NG
J F Barrick	RCAF	5/-/2	135 RCAF	Canada
A W B Clare	RAAF	5/-/-	76 RAAF	NG
C R Bush	RAF	3.5?/2/3	15 RNZAF	Sol
P C Webb	RAF	3+3sh/-/5	260/2 SAAF	NA
B D Russel	RCAF	2+5sh/2/4	14 RCAF	Canada

Notes for Appendices A, B & C

1. Scores are shown as – confirmed victories/probable victories/damaged
2. Multiple shared claims are shown as – ‘+3sh’, which indicates three half/part shares in addition to any full claims
3. Theatre abbreviations:

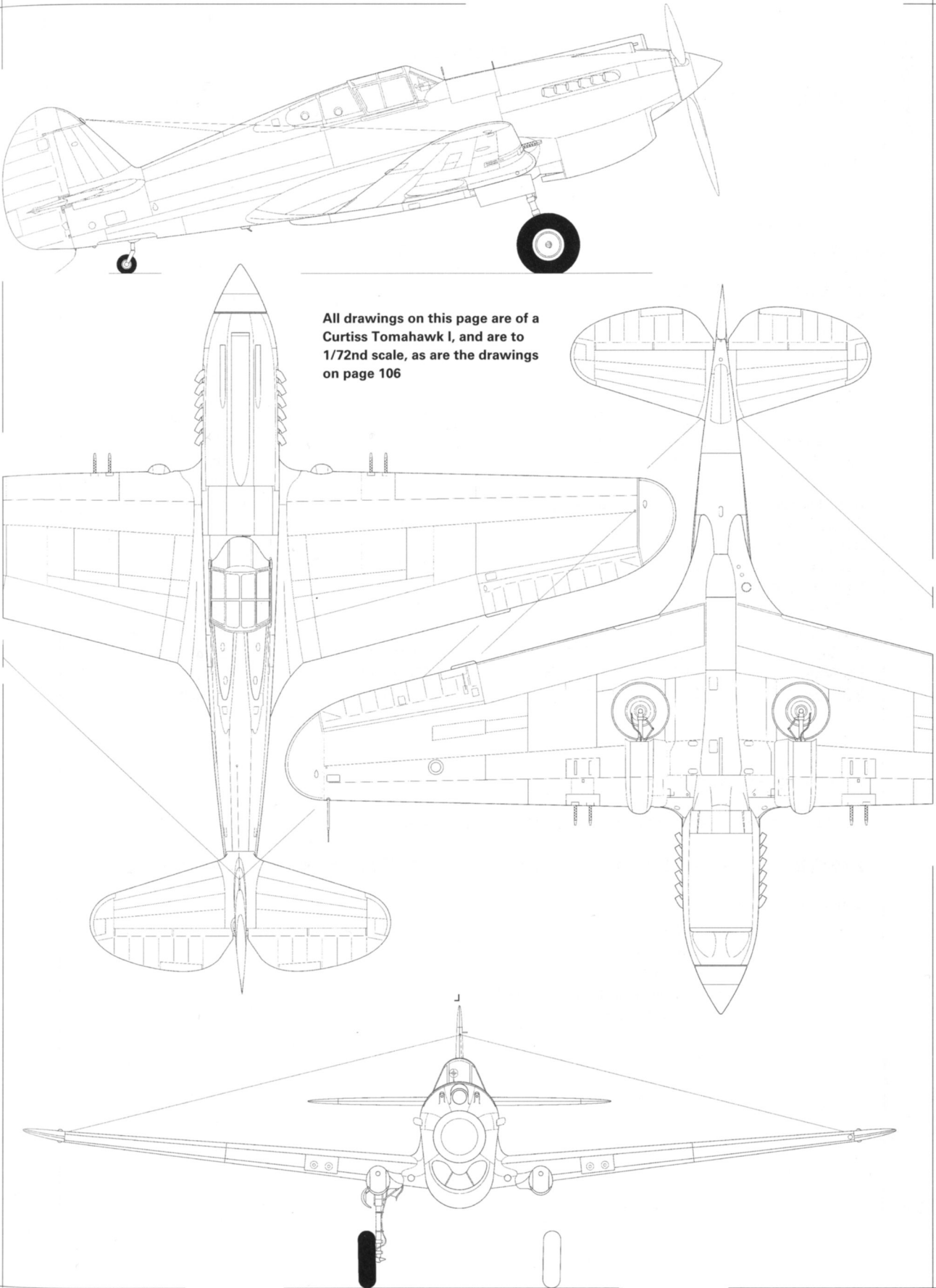
NA - North Africa

NG - New Guinea

EA - East Africa

Sol - Solomon Islands and South-west Pacific

UK - UK and Europe



Mohawk IV

Tomahawk I

Kittyhawk IA

Kittyhawk II

Kittyhawk III

Kittyhawk III

Kittyhawk IV

COLOUR PLATES

1

Tomahawk IIB AK490 of No 73 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Peter Wykeham-Barnes, El Gamil, Egypt, September 1941

On 15 September 1941 Tomahawks AK490 and AM464 were delivered to No 73 Sqn possibly with the intention of re-equipping the unit. In the event only one more (AM490) was delivered, and they were kept for just a matter of weeks. The aircraft retained their 'European' colours, but were also decorated with the squadron's pre-war marking – a unique feature. They were flown regularly by pilots of No 73 Sqn, including the CO, 12-victory ace Sqn Ldr Peter Wykeham-Barnes. AK490 was written off when it was hit by a ground-looping AN326 at Amriya on 21 October 1941. Both Tomahawks were serving with No 4 Sqn SAAF at the time.

2

Tomahawk IIB AN413 *NAN* of No 112 Sqn, flown by Plt Off Jack Bartle, LG 102, Egypt, October 1941

Six-kill Australian ace Jack Bartle flew this Tomahawk soon after he joined No 112 Sqn in September 1941. Although decorated with the famous sharksmouth markings, it was not at this time wearing the unit's GA code. Bartle personalised it with the outline of a kangaroo and the name *NAN*. Although he often flew AN413, he made no claims in it. The fighter was written off with combat damage after a brush with Bf 109s on 20 November, two days before Bartle's first kill.

3

Tomahawk IIB AK402 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Plt Off Neville Duke, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, November 1941

Nineteen-year-old Neville Duke was assigned this Tomahawk soon after he joined No 112 Sqn from the UK, where he had gained two victories on Spitfires. Flying the aircraft on 21 November, he shared in the destruction of a Fiat CR.42, and by the end of the month he had shot down two more aircraft and damaged another – all in AK402. The G.50 he brought down on the 30th was his fifth success, but he was also shot down (by a Bf 109) and the aircraft lost later that same day.

4

Tomahawk IIB AK374 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sgt Maurice Hards, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, 26 August 1941

On 26 August 1941 nine Tomahawks of No 250 Sqn, performing a shipping patrol north of Sidi Barrani, encountered a dozen Bf 109s. In the subsequent fight three German fighters were shot down, including one by the pilot of this aircraft, Sgt Maurice Hards. This was the first of his seven victories, although his jubilation was short-lived for he was himself then hit by enemy fire, wounded and forced to crash-land near the Mersah Matruh road.

5

Tomahawk IIB AM392 *NUX VOMICA* of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sgt Bob Whittle, LG 13 Sidi Haneish South, Egypt, August-October 1941

NUX VOMICA (Deadly Poison) was the name given by Australian pilot Sgt Bob Whittle to this aircraft, which he first flew on operations on 4 August 1941. Although he added the name as soon as AM392 was assigned to him, it was some time before the aircraft gained its unit codes. However, it was thus adorned when, on 30 October, Whittle used it to shoot down a Bf 109 near Sollum. AM392 was then withdrawn from service, but later joined No 3 Sqn RAAF and was flown by future ace 'Nicky' Barr on his first operational sortie in late November. It was subsequently passed on to No 5 Sqn SAAF and eventually struck off charge on 1 July 1943.

6

Tomahawk IIB AK498 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Flt Lt Clive Caldwell, LG 123 Maddelena 3, Libya, November-December 1941

The leading exponent of the P-40 series during World War 2 was Australian Clive Caldwell of No 250 Sqn. He became the first Commonwealth ace to claim five victories on the Tomahawk, achieving this feat on 7 July. In November he was assigned this aircraft, which carried his 'scoreboard'. On 23 November he used AK498 to destroy two Bf 109s, but his outstanding feat with it came on 5 December when he was credited with shooting down five Ju 87s. His ninth and final confirmed claim with AK498 was on 20 December when another Bf 109 fell to him. AK498 was also used by future ace Plt Off John Waddy to make his first confirmed claim on 9 December. This aircraft was struck off charge on 1 April 1944.

7

Tomahawk IIB AM386 *SWEET FA* of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt Alan Rawlinson, Lydda, Palestine, June 1941

Alan Rawlinson had several claims from flying Gladiators and Hurricanes in the desert, and he 'made ace' on 28 June when, in an exceptional combat flying Tomahawk AK446, he downed three Vichy Martin 167s. He first flew this aircraft, which bore the sobriquet *SWEET FA*, in early July, but it completed only seven sorties during the brief Syria campaign, flown by Rawlinson and fellow ace Peter Turnbull. On 22 August, while Rawlinson was practising aerobatics, AM386's starboard tailplane and elevator came adrift, and he was able to land the aircraft only thanks to considerable flying skill. This aircraft was struck off charge on 1 February 1944.

8

Tomahawk IIB AN343 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sgt Rex Wilson, LG 110, Egypt, November 1941

Sgt Rex Wilson flew this aircraft with No 3 Sqn during the early part of November 1941, although he made no claims with it. He had scored one victory during the Syrian campaign, but did not claim again until late November when, between the 25th and 30th, he was credited with three destroyed and six damaged. AN343 was lost in combat whilst being flown by Flg Off Evans on the 25th. Wilson became an ace on 1 December, but his was a brief glory – on 9 December he was shot down and killed.

9

Tomahawk IIB AN311 of No 2 Sqn SAAF, flown by Lt Danny Saville, El Adem, Libya, 21 November 1941

On 21 November 1941 Lt E C 'Danny' Saville opened his account in a most unconventional way whilst flying top cover to No 4 Sqn SAAF. His flight tangled with three C.200s, and during the fight Saville got so close to one that his starboard wing struck the Italian fighter, which fell away. Some accounts suggest that it crashed, but in any event he was officially credited with a probable. Saville made his first confirmed claim on 4 December when he shot down a Ju 87. He later served with RAF units, and was killed by flak in Italy in September 1943 while commanding Kittyhawk-equipped No 260 Sqn. AN311 later served with No 208 Sqn, before being transferred to the Royal Egyptian Air Force on 1 May 1943.

10

Tomahawk IIB AM401 of No 5 Sqn SAAF, flown by Capt Johnny Human, LG 121, Egypt, 11 March 1942

No 5 Sqn SAAF had begun operations in early March 1942, and on the evening of the 11th one of its patrols encountered enemy bombers. Two Ju 88s were shot down and two others damaged, one of the latter by future ace Capt D W 'Johnny' Human, who was flying this aircraft (which had previously served with No 2 Sqn SAAF) when he made his first accredited claim. He left the squadron four days later for No 2 Sqn SAAF. AM401 did not survive long, being shot down on a sweep on 3 June.

11

Kittyhawk I AK759 of No 94 Sqn, flown by Sgt 'Eddie' Edwards, Gasr el Arid, Libya, 20 March 1942

The leading Canadian pilot on the Kittyhawk, and third ranking Commonwealth ace on the type overall, was Sgt J F 'Eddie' Edwards, who served with No 94 until May 1942, claiming one victory. He flew this aircraft just once, on 20 March. During that month No 94's Kittyhawks had, for some reason, been decorated with red and white checks on the rudder – this was probably why some Luftwaffe combat reports of the time referred to encounters with 'Polish Curtisses'! AK759 saw subsequent service with No 450 Sqn RAAF and No 2 Sqn SAAF, prior to being struck off charge on 1 June 1943.

12

Kittyhawk I AK578 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Flg Off Neville Duke, LG 139 Gambut Main, Libya, 14 February 1942

This aircraft was the regular mount of Flg Off Neville Duke during the first months of 1942. On 14 February he shared in No 112 Sqn's achievements when the unit enjoyed considerable success near Tobruk – Duke sent a C.200 crashing into the ground and then shared in the destruction of a second. These were his final claims with the Curtiss fighter, and his only ones in the Kittyhawk. AK578 saw further action with Nos 4 and 5 Sqn SAAF before being passed on to No 73 OTU. It was listed as missing during a training flight with this unit on 4 March 1944.

13

Kittyhawk I AK772 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sgt Henry Burney and Sqn Ldr Clive Caldwell, LG 142 Gambut 1, Libya, March-May 1942

This Kittyhawk was one of the most distinguished of No 112 Sqn's warhorses during the spring of 1942, and two aces made claims while flying it. The first was Sgt Henry Burney, who downed a C.202 on 13 March for his fifth, and final, victory. The very next day his CO, Sqn Ldr Clive Caldwell, was flying it when he too destroyed a C.202, and shared in the destruction of a second Folgore. The last victory for AK772 came on 23 April when Caldwell brought down a Bf 109 at Bir Hacheim – his final claim both with a Curtiss fighter and in the desert. The aircraft did not last long after this, being shot down during a fighter-bomber sortie on the afternoon of 30 May, with the loss of recently promoted Plt Off Burney.

14

Kittyhawk I AL225 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sgt 'Blue' Leu, LG 75, Egypt, 21 June 1942

'Blue' Leu was another Australian pilot serving with No 112 Sqn, gaining ace status in February 1942 and receiving the DFM. He had claimed 3.5 victories flying the Tomahawk, and gained three more in the Kittyhawk – his first on 25 January was also the squadron's first with the new type. On the morning of 21 June Leu flew this aircraft on an armed reconnaissance mission and bombed Sidi Aziez airfield. The aircraft was hit by enemy flak and set on fire, however, and Leu force-landed with wounds. He duly became a PoW.

15

Kittyhawk IA ET790 of No 112 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Billy Drake, LG 91, Egypt, 8 July 1942

With 13 and two shared victories, Sqn Ldr Billy Drake was the leading RAF pilot on the Tomahawk/Kittyhawk. He had 'made ace' on 6 June with his first Kittyhawk kill when he destroyed a Bf 109. On 8 July he claimed his second when flying this aircraft on a fighter-bomber mission to El Daba, bouncing some Bf 109s of JG 27 and claiming one destroyed. From then until the end of the year Drake was to score steadily before he was rested from operations. ET790, which carried the ? symbol rather than an individual letter, did not last long, being downed by fighters on 22 July.

16

Kittyhawk I AK919 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr Mike Judd, LG 91, Egypt, 6 June 1942

Early on 6 June, while flying this aircraft, Sqn Ldr Mike Judd, CO of No 250, led 11 other Kittyhawks on a sweep to the Knightsbridge-Acroma area. There, they met a dozen Bf 109s and C.202s, and in a brief fight Judd damaged one of each type without his unit suffering any losses. He remained with the squadron until November, claiming four kills. During this period No 250 Sqn's aircraft were marked with a red arrow over the exhaust stubs. Judd later became a wing leader with the 2nd TAF in Europe, where he is believed to have made his fifth claim. AK919 was struck off charge on 8 March 1944.

17

Kittyhawk III FR120 of No 250 Sqn, flown by Flt Lt Gordie Troke, Castel Benito, Libya, February 1943

Canadian Gordie Troke claimed three and two shared kills with No 250 Sqn between July 1942 and February 1943. He regularly flew this aircraft from 8 December 1942 through to 26 February 1943. He was flying it on a ground attack mission

on 16 January when he strafed and destroyed a Ju 52/3m, and also five days later when he destroyed a Ju 88 on the ground at Castel Benito. He was also at the controls of FR120 over the Mareth Line on the afternoon of 26 February when he engaged a Bf 109G which was credited to him as probably destroyed – his final Kittyhawk claim. FR120 was transferred to the *Armée de l'Air* on 3 March 1945.

18

Kittyhawk IA ET788 of No 260 Sqn, flown by Sgt Ron Cundy, Gasr el Arid, Libya, May 1942

Ron Cundy was another Australian to fly with the RAF and become an ace, and he flew this aircraft on a number of occasions during the early summer of 1942. His first combat came in July, and he was later promoted to flight commander with No 260. Cundy 'made ace' in November, taking his total to five and two shared kills. He left the unit soon afterwards and returned to serve in Australia. ET788 ended its days with No 73 OTU, being struck off charge on 25 April 1944.

19

Kittyhawk III 42-45798 (FR829) of No 260 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr O V Hanbury, Castel Benito, Libya, January 1943

When he began flying Kittyhawks with No 260 Sqn in the spring of 1942, 'Pedro' Hanbury had 4.5 victories in Hurricanes. In July 1942 he left the unit, having increased his tally to eight and two shared, but returned in November when the squadron was mainly flying fighter-bomber missions. In early 1943 Hanbury regularly flew HS-X, which still carried its US serial across the rudder – at this time FR829 was also HS-X, and they are thought to be the same aircraft. Hanbury remained with No 260 until April, taking his score to ten and two shared. He was lost over the Bay of Biscay on 3 June 1943 when the Hudson transport he was a passenger in was shot down by a Ju 88C. This aircraft later saw service with No 260 Sqn, before being struck off charge on 22 February 1945.

20

Kittyhawk III FR350 of No 260 Sqn, flown by Flg Off 'Eddie' Edwards, Castel Benito, Libya, January 1943

No 260 Sqn's leading pilot was 'Eddie' Edwards, who flew FR350 regularly during December 1942 and January 1943. On 30 December, during a patrol over Bir el Zidan, six Bf 109s were spotted. Flying this aircraft, Edwards dived and hit one from only 100 yards and it crashed. He hit a second before his guns jammed, and this was shared with another pilot. Edwards was again at the controls of FR350 on 2 January 1943 when he destroyed another Bf 109 for his tenth victory. Aside from serving with No 260 Sqn, this aircraft also spent time with No 450 Sqn RAAF, No 112 Sqn and No 5 Sqn SAAF, prior to being struck off charge on 8 March 1944.

21

Kittyhawk I AK897 of No 450 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sgt Don McBurnie, LG 142 Gambut 1, Libya, May 1942

Don McBurnie was an ace with 5.5 victories, all of which were made during his tour in Kittyhawks with No 450 Sqn in the desert in 1942. On 23 May he was flying this aircraft near Tmimi when he claimed a Bf 109 from II./JG 27 for his second victory. McBurnie achieved his fifth kill in July, although by then AK897 had been shot down (on 29 May).

22

Kittyhawk I AK634 of No 450 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt 'Willy' Williams, LG 91, Egypt, 5 July 1942

New Zealander 'Willy' Williams made all his claims during his tour with No 450 Sqn in the summer of 1942. Flying this aircraft (which carried a personal marking on the nose) on an early morning armed reconnaissance patrol on 5 July, he came across a single Ju 88 from I./LG 1 and shot it down for his second victory. In October Williams became CO of No 450, but his tenure was brief for on the 31st he was shot down and made a PoW. Sent to Germany, he participated in the 'Great Escape' of March 1944, and was one of those later murdered by the Gestapo after being recaptured. Having previously served with No 112 Sqn, AK634 was struck off charge on 26 April 1944.

23

Kittyhawk I AK903 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt 'Nicky' Barr, Sidi Haneish, Egypt, March 1942

The top-scoring pilot with No 3 Sqn RAAF during the war was 'Nicky' Barr, who in exactly six months rose from a newly arrived pilot officer to CO of the unit! On the evening of 8 March 1942 he was in this aircraft, leading 11 others, when they intercepted a large formation of Ju 87s, closely escorted by nine C.200s and C.202s and two Bf 109s. Nos 3 and 450 Sqn carried out a successful 'bounce', Barr downing a C.200 for his ninth victory, probably destroying another, and damaged two more. AK903 was later shot down near Makhkad by Bf 109s on 22 July 1942 whilst serving with No 250 Sqn.

24

Kittyhawk IA ET953 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Bobby Gibbes, LG 91, Egypt, August-September 1942

All of Bobby Gibbes' claims were made during almost two years of service with No 3 Sqn RAAF. His aircraft usually carried the letter V, and in the summer of 1942, while he was CO, he flew ET953. Gibbes made two claims with this fighter, the first coming on 23 August when, flying top cover to No 450 Sqn in the Deir el Quattara area, he damaged a Bf 109. Just over a week later, on the afternoon of 1 September, he hit a Bf 109 in a fight near El Alamein and was credited with having destroyed it, taking his tally to eight. Subsequently serving with No 250 Sqn and No 5 Sqn SAAF, ET953 was written off whilst still with the latter unit when it stalled on take off after its pilot tried to avoid a gunpost at Neffatia on 2 March 1943.

25

Kittyhawk IIA FL341 of No 3 Sqn RAAF, flown by Wg Cdr H F 'Billy' Burton, OC No 239 Wing, Marble Arch, Libya, 28 December 1942

Wg Cdr 'Billy' Burton had four shared victories flying Spitfires when he assumed command of No 239 Wing in late 1942. When leading his wing, he flew various aircraft from its units, and on 28 December 1942 he made use of short-backed Kittyhawk IIA FL341 – the only time he did so. He achieved ace status with his first Kittyhawk kill in early January, flying FL347, also a No 3 Sqn aircraft. Like 'Pedro' Hanbury, Burton was a passenger in the Hudson downed over the Bay of Biscay on 3 June 1943 by a Ju 88C. FL341 was struck off charge on 8 March 1944.

26

Kittyhawk I AL173 of No 2 Sqn SAAF, flown by Lt Vernon Lindsay, Gambut, Libya, 7 June 1942

A long-serving member of No 2 Sqn SAAF, Lindsay eventually gained four and two shared kills. His first claim was on 7 June when, flying this aircraft near Bir Hacheim, he encountered four Bf 109s. In the resulting combat Lindsay hit one which he claimed as damaged. His first confirmed success came a week later. AL173 later served with No 73 OTU on training duties until struck off charge on 22 February 1945.

27

Kittyhawk IA ET512 of No 4 Sqn SAAF, flown by Flg Off John Waddy, LG 97, Egypt, 21 July 1942

After serving with Nos 250 and 260 Sqn, in which he claimed 11.5 kills, Australian John Waddy joined No 4 Sqn SAAF in July 1942 and remained with it until early October. He made his first claim with the unit on 21 July when, flying ET512 on a bomber escort mission, he was credited with a probable during combat with Bf 109s. ET512 did not last long, however, crash-landing with combat damage on 8 August.

28

P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-9 of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt Les Jackson, Port Moresby, New Guinea, April 1942

One of only two RAAF pilots to make ace solely in the New Guinea theatre, Flt Lt Les Jackson is believed to have claimed three of his kills while flying A29-9 during the defence of Port Moresby in March and April 1942. Part of the first batch of P-40s transferred from US stocks in March 1942, it was used by Jackson to claim a Zero on 5 April near Port Moresby. He also used A29-9 to down two more Zeros on 17 and 18 April. The P-40 was damaged soon after and broken up for parts.

29

P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-39 of No 76 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Peter Turnbull, Weir Field, Townsville, Australia, May-June 1942

Turnbull was with No 75 Sqn during its defence of Port Moresby, where he claimed three Zero kills. On 26 April he became CO of No 76 Sqn, which he led to Milne Bay in July. On 27 August, while carrying out a ground attack, he crashed and was killed. A29-39 was struck off charge in late 1948.

30

P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-99 CLEOPATRA of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flg Off Geoff Atherton, Milne Bay, New Guinea, August 1942

The second RAAF pilot to become an ace solely in New Guinea was Geoff Atherton. He was flying this aircraft during the fighting over Milne Bay in August when, on the 11th, he shot down a Zero and may have also been credited with a second. By this time the unit's aircraft mainly wore RAAF-style blue and white markings. This aircraft also carried Atherton's personal marking – the name *CLEOPATRA* – above the exhaust stubs on the starboard side.

31

P-40E Kittyhawk IA A29-153 GRACE of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr 'Woof' Arthur, Port Moresby, New Guinea, January 1943

Arthur served in New Guinea with No 76 Sqn in 1942. In January 1943 he became CO of No 75 Sqn, and regularly flew A29-153 over the next few months. One occasion was on 7 March, when he put on a dazzling aerobatic display for a visiting newsreel cameraman. However, it was while flying another of No 75's Kittyhawks that he downed his first Japanese aircraft three days later. This aircraft was later written off whilst serving with No 2 OTU in Mildura in October 1944.

32

P-40K Kittyhawk III A29-459 CLEOPATRA of No 75 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Geoff Atherton, Horn Island, New Guinea, mid 1943

Atherton was still a flight commander when assigned this Kittyhawk III in March 1943. From January 1943, unit codes were worn by all RAAF Kittyhawks, and as an additional identification feature, aircraft tails and spinners were painted white. Although unconfirmed, it is probable that Atherton was flying this aircraft when, on 13 June, he scored his final kill when he downed a 'Betty' over Milne Bay for his fifth victory.

33

P-40M Kittyhawk III A29-305 of No 86 Sqn RAAF, flown by Flt Lt B Whittle, Merauke, New Guinea, 23 January 1944

After service in the desert Bob Whittle returned to Australia, and in mid 1943 he joined No 86 Sqn, where he remained until the following June. Although No 86 saw little air combat, he did make his final claims against the Japanese when, on 23 January, he downed a Zero, and shared in the destruction of another A6M and a 'Betty'. His aircraft was delivered in February 1943 and later received No 86's unit codes MP-K. It also carried two Japanese flag symbols for Whittle's kills.

34

P-40N-20 Kittyhawk IV A29-607 VE of No 80 Sqn RAAF, flown by Sqn Ldr John Waddy, Noemfoor, Dutch New Guinea, September-October 1944

Waddy was one of the leading Australian wartime pilots, all his claims were made while serving in the desert during 1941-42, mainly flying Curtiss fighters. In 1943 he returned to Australia and was later given command of No 80 Sqn. He flew several P-40Ns while with the unit, which usually bore his wife's name and his impressive scoreboard.

35

P-40E Kittyhawk IA NZ3040 of No 15 Sqn RNZAF, flown by Flt Lt Johnnie Gibson, Whenuapai, New Zealand, October 1942

Flt Lt Johnnie Gibson had 11.5 kills in Hurricanes to his name when he was seconded to the RNZAF, joining No 15 Sqn soon after it formed. Among others, he flew this aircraft, which wore a standard RAF colour scheme, including unit letters, although these were later dropped. In December 1943 he became CO of his old unit, and over Rabaul on 23 January 1944 he claimed his last victory, a Zero.

36

P-40M Kittyhawk III NZ3072 Wairarapa Wildcat of No 14 Sqn RNZAF, flown by Flg Off Geoff Fiskén, Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, July 1943

The Commonwealth's leading pilot in the war against Japan,

Fiskén had joined the newly formed No 14 Sqn after escaping from Malaya. In mid-1943 No 14 moved up to Guadalcanal, where he flew this aircraft to claim two Zeros on 12 June. As both he and his groundcrew came from Wairarapa, it was suitably decorated and named, and eventually carried Fiskén's impressive scoreboard, which included the only bomber (a 'Betty') shot down by the RNZAF in the Pacific.

37

P-40N-1 Kittyhawk IV NZ3126 of No 17 Sqn/No 4 Servicing Unit RNZAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Guy Newton, Ondonga, New Georgia, January 1944

The most successful RNZAF pilot in the Solomons was Guy Newton, who had joined No 17 Sqn as a flight commander, but in June 1943 became its CO. He led it to the Solomons, and on this first tour he claimed a Zero kill. Late in the year No 17 returned and, flying this aircraft over Rabaul on Christmas Eve, he downed two more Zeros and was also credited with a probable. Newton became an ace in early January 1944 when, in another strike, he destroyed two more Zeros.

38

P-40K Warhawk 42-45945 of No 111 Sqn RCAF, flown by Sqn Ldr Ken Boomer, Umnak, Aleutian Islands, 25 September 1942

Between July and October 1942, No 111 Sqn maintained a detachment forward at Umnak, but flew USAAF P-40Ks that retained their US camouflage and serials with the US star markings replaced with RCAF roundels. During the unit's first offensive mission – a bomber escort to Kiska on 25 September – Boomer engaged and shot down an A6M2-N 'Rufe' floatplane fighter. It was the only victory by the 'home-

based' RCAF during World War 2. Although final confirmation is lacking, it is believed that Boomer was flying this aircraft during his historic combat.

39

Mohawk IV 2522 of 'B' Flight No 3 Sqn SAAF, flown by Capt Jack Parsonson, Aiscia, Somaliland, September-October 1941

In September 1941 No 3 Sqn re-equipped with the Mohawk IV for operations in Ethiopia. However, to cover the Vichy French enclave at Djibouti, 'B' Flight (titled No 41 Sqn Fighter Detachment for a time) was detached to Aiscia with three aircraft, and had Capt Jack Parsonson as its deputy commander. The aircraft are believed to have been 2516, 2528 and this one, 2522. It was whilst flying this aircraft that on 5 October Parsonson strafed and destroyed an Italian Savoia transport at Djibouti. This ground claim was the future ace's first success against the enemy.

40

Mohawk IV BB928 Cymru am Byth of No 155 Sqn, flown by Sqn Ldr 'Porky' Jefferies, Agartala, Bengal, India, January 1943

One of the few aces to use the Mohawk operationally, 'Porky' Jefferies was the only one to make an air-to-air claim. He became an ace flying Hurricanes over Malta during 1941, and in India in late 1942 was given command of Mohawk-equipped No 155 Sqn. During a fighter sweep to Akyab on 28 January 1943, a solitary Ki-43 dived on them and, giving chase, Jefferies fired and hit the fighter, which has been variously credited as destroyed and a probable. BB928 was struck off charge on 29 February 1944.

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Tomahawk and Kittyhawk Aces of the RAF and Commonwealth



The first of the lend-lease fighters supplied to the RAF from the USA, the Curtiss Tomahawk was something of a disappointment to the British when it arrived in Europe in late 1940. Lacking the high altitude performance of the Spitfire and Bf 109, the fighter was assigned the less-demanding army co-operation role in Europe, but overseas it was pressed into action as a frontline fighter through sheer expediency. Although the Desert Air Force squadrons flying it in North Africa enjoyed some success during the campaigns of 1941,

the Tomahawk was often little more than cannon fodder for the vastly superior Bf 109F. The advent of the improved Kittyhawk in late 1941 went some way to redressing this imbalance, and pilots of the calibre of Caldwell, Gibbes, Edwards and Drake all achieved scores into double figures with the type. In New Guinea and the Solomons, Australian and New Zealand pilots also saw much action against the Japanese in 1942-43. In total, some 46 aces achieved five or more kills with the Tomahawk and Kittyhawk.

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